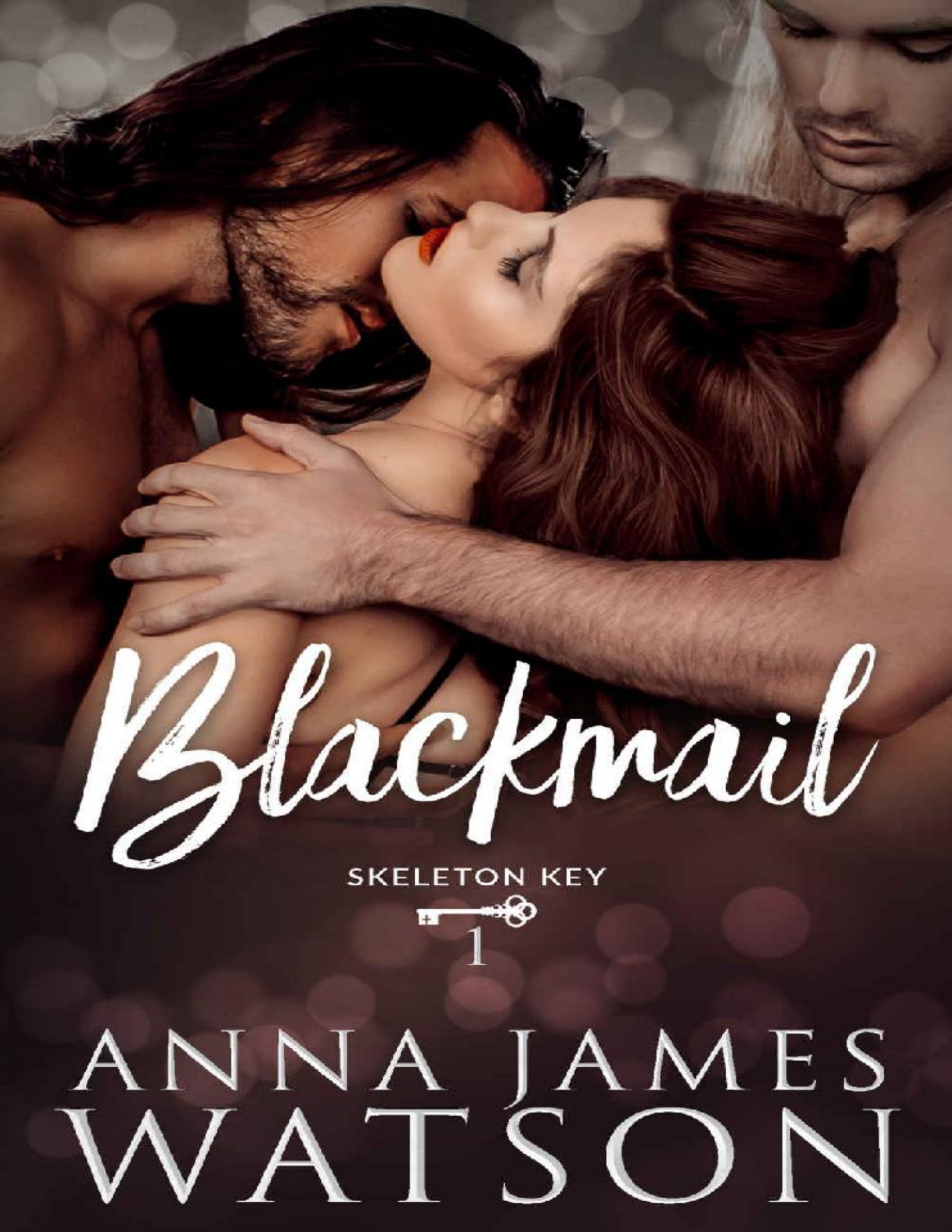
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-------Skeleton Key Book One-------

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Acknowledgements

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For David, who taught me the value of admitting one's own fantasies.

For my husband, who indulges mine.

And for anyone and everyone who has ever known what it's like to love someone you wish you didn't.

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Part One

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Author's Note

I know that, as a reader, sometimes I just really need to get to the good stuff. So, if you'd like to skip to (pardon the pun) the climax, click here.

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– Mia –

I fell asleep in the Philosophy Department lounge—again. The Philosophy lounge was hardly ever used, and had huge overly cushy armchairs that just begged to be slept in. If you were in your junior year at Yale and had just pulled an all-nighter writing a twelve-page essay, you would probably have done it too.

Well, maybe you wouldn't have. Actually most juniors wouldn't have during this particular semester; they would have been on their absolute best behavior, terrified of doing anything that made them look less than super human—because the second semester of junior year is when you can be tapped to join a secret society.

I genuinely don't care about being tapped though. I do, however, care quite a bit about being chosen as editor-in-chief for the *Yale Daily News*, which I have spent the last two and a half years pouring my soul into. So forfeiting sleep, writing essays at the last minute, and even occasionally skipping classes are all sacrifices I am willing to make for the *Daily.*

Quick footsteps and male voices break the silence of my sanctuary, painfully jolting me out of a dream I was destined to forget. My eyes shoot open as my ears come into focus well enough to recognize those voices—one of them belongs to Tristan Masters, the loathsome asshat I have the misfortune of sharing a dorm floor with; the other belongs to Julian Roth, my grad student teacher's assistant who is in charge of eight percent of my grade for Neo-Kantian Ethics. *Shit!*

I quickly tap my phone: 11:47 blinks up at me. *Shit, shit shit! I slept through his discussion group! And now he's about to catch me!*

I look around—the lounge door is open, the edges of two shadows are hitting the wall, they're only steps away from the door. I spring out of

my tattered armchair, reflexively fling my backpack over my shoulder, and practically dive into the only hiding spot available—the supply closet.

I manage to get the door closed to within an inch before shadows are replaced by flesh and blood figures. Julian strolls in first, talking enthusiastically about the rise of utilitarian normative ethics. Next to him, Tristan, looking as cocky and self-assured as always, runs a hand through his freakishly perfect long blond hair.

I've known Tristan since freshmen year. We're both in Berkeley College, and somehow, all three years in a row, we've been placed on the same floor. Unfortunately, in that time he's somehow only become more awful. He's spoiled and self-important because his parents are ridiculously wealthy; used to getting his way because, although I am loath to admit it, he is unnaturally gorgeous; and predisposed to treating people like a means to an end. Our dislike has been mutual from the moment we met, probably because I don't care about his looks or his money, which I'm happy to let him know whenever provoked, which is often.

Julian I met last year, the first year he was working as a T.A., when my roommate, Leanne, and I happened to sign up for a discussion period he was teaching. We've both taken every opportunity since to take classes with him. He is intelligent, witty, always willing to discuss topics at length, and he grades papers fairly. However, despite Leanne's attempts to Internet-stalk him, I don't know much about him outside of academia.

"Isn't that just paraphrasing Hume?" Tristan drawls as I decide against closing the door all the way, lest it creak, or click, or do anything to draw their attention to it.

"Not exactly," Julian responds, "if you consider what Hume meant by—"

Great, this could take a while. I internally sigh, sink back onto a pile of cheap toilet paper and boxes of coffee straws. If I get hungry there are little packets of Splenda to snack on. Yum.

Click.

What was that? I think. Then I hear a harsh sliding noise, metal on metal. *Did they lock the door?*

"What—" Tristan says, but then he goes silent and there is a quick thud, followed by a scraping noise, like the sound of furniture sliding across the floor.

"Shut up," Julian hisses, his voice suddenly dark, husky, controlling. Then another strange noise, something sliding against clothe maybe?

What the hell?

I stand up and carefully peek through the tiny crack in the door. Without opening it further all I can see is half a body—Tristan's legs. His body looks like it's bent forward over a couch, and Julian is behind him, his groin is pressed against Tristan's ass. I twist myself around just a little, accidentally opening the door just the tiniest bit. I cringe, but no sound is made.

Now I can see more. Julian is holding a black belt, and it is strung through Tristan's mouth, forcing his jaw open, gagging him. It looks painful. *What the fucking hell?*

Julian's other hand travels from the dip in Tristan's lower back around his waist, under his thigh, not stopping until his fingers possessively clutch a handful of crotch. His legs are between Tristan's, spreading them apart, forcing him lower onto the couch. Julian bends over even further. I can't see either of their faces now, but it seems like he is whispering something to Tristan.

What the hell is going on? I ask myself again, my heart pounding with adrenaline, my mind spiraling, trying to understand what I am seeing. *Tristan isn't exactly struggling, but he has a belt in his mouth…And…and Julian is our TA…Is he using his authority to make Tristan have sex with him? This is, this is like a form of rape. Tristan is a complete jackass, but he doesn't deserve to be raped. I've got to do something! What can I do? I can't physically stop Julian? I can't—*

I can record it, I realize, then Tristan will have proof and Julian can be prosecuted.

I pull out my phone and carefully position the camera so that it gets everything that can be seen through the door without opening it any further.

Through the phone's screen I watch Julian bite down on the back of Tristan's neck with the same elegant and terrible precision that a lion uses to kill a gazelle. Tristan, his tongue suppressed by the belt, makes a noise that sounds like a moan of pain. Julian's free hand fumbles around between Tristan's legs, and his fingers slip into Tristan's now loosened waistband.

With a few practiced tugs, Julian has Tristan's pants over his hips and ass and onto the floor. Tristan's legs, lean, long, and practically the color of moonlight, stand out in stark contrast to the black boxer briefs that are already being invaded by Julian, who doesn't show the slightest sign of hesitation. They slide down, revealing a very erect penis, which, free from its binding, swings up only to be caught by the couch cushions he's pressed against.

Julian touches the base of it with just the tips of his fingers and brushes them all the way up to the tip then back down. His hand disappears again between Tristan's legs. Tristan's eyes are now closed, his brow scrunched, his jaw lax, and the moans he makes, while still muffled, no longer sound to me like moans of pain or struggle.

My eyes slide from the phone screen upward, so I am watching them directly now. Julian slides his chest down Tristan's back until he is kneeling and his nose is brushing the crevice between Tristan's ass cheeks. Julian tilts his chin and slips deeper. I can't tell what he's licking, but he's definitely licking something.

My heart starts pounding in an entirely different way now. *I guess I was wrong*, I realize as Tristan's moans turn into groans, and my eyes accidentally flick back to his hard cock. *If Julian were forcing him to do this I don't think he'd be enjoying it.*

Julian lets go of the belt, and it falls away from Tristan's face as his hands move to Tristan's hips. After one last hungry twist of his head—like he's drinking life itself out of Tristan's skin—Julian pulls away, spins Tristan around and pushes him onto the couch. Tristan falls with grace, his face flushed and his legs wide open. Julian's head is instantly between them, the tip of his tongue trailing all over Tristan's balls.

Tristan's eyes are closed, his head reclining more and more. His hands lace through Julian's hair with increasing desperation as Julian's light touches turn into full, broad-tongued licks. On one of these upward licks, Tristan bucks his hips and Julian's mouth opens to catch the head of his cock.

My breaths become slow and sharp. Somewhere in the back of my mind the notion that I should stop watching—*this is a private moment*—strikes me, but it is easily ignored and quickly forgotten. I lower the phone, but I can't drag my eyes way from Julian and Tristan.

Tristan's eyes are closed; his mouth hangs open, frozen in ecstasy. Julian's eyes, though, are open, looking up at Tristan with triumph and satisfaction. Watching Julian slide Tristan's cock in and out of his mouth, watching the way he moves his whole head up and down, practically burying his face in Tristan's blond curls…I feel tingles start at my knees and crawl their way up my legs. My eyes trail to Julian's hands, wrapped around Tristan's thighs, pulling them in a slow circular motion. My own thighs quiver just a bit, as if I can feel the ghost of his fingers in the exact same spots.

Eck. What is wrong with me? Asks some part of me that most of me is not listening to. *Tristan is a stuck-up, self-important, utterly vile bully, and Julian is my TA, who, generally speaking, I like, but…but…they are not attractive!*

Yes they are, chimes in every part of my body from the eyes down.

Tristan's legs are spasming now, his fingers are clenched tight, desperately pushing Julian's head down. A little trickle of warmth slides down my labia. I can't help but rub my thighs together.

Tristan’s toes curl. The bulge in Julian’s pants has grown so large that he reaches down, unzips his fly and—

RING, RING, RING!

FUCK! I shove my hand into my pocket and frantically squeeze the sides of my phone trying to silence the ringtone. I succeed, but it’s too late—the moans have stopped, replaced by alert silence.

Shit shit shit! I look around the dark closet—there’s nothing for me to hide behind. I am so screwed.

I hear quick, direct footsteps. In only a few seconds they stop right in front of the door. Light floods in, interrupted only by the angry face and disheveled hair of Tristan Masters.

“You,” he sneers, as fury replaces shock, “what are you doing here?”

“I—I fell asleep,” I stutter, utterly caught off guard. “What are—why are—why are *you* here?”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve already deduced why,” he quips back. “You fell asleep in a supply closet?”

“I, well, I…I didn’t fall asleep in the closet, I…” My eyes automatically wander as I try to think of something that won’t get me into even more trouble. Unfortunately, my wandering eyes, quite accidentally, get snagged on the hem of Tristan’s shirt, which is tucked behind his impressive penis—still very erect, despite my interruption. “Uhh…”

Before I can come up with anything that resembles actual words Tristan’s eyes land on the phone in my hand, and my eyes follow. Shit—the video app still open, even though the call stopped the recording, what I’d been doing is obvious.

His expression goes from annoyed to livid as he violently snatches the phone away.

“Give that back!” I demand, automatically reaching for it. Unsurprisingly, he does not oblige, and my attempts to grab it back are pointless. Tristan has got at least six inches on me, and he merely steps away when I lunge, holding the phone out of reach with one hand, and swiping the screen with his other. A few finger taps later and it’s obvious by the combination of fury and horror on his face that he’s scrolling through the video.

I reluctantly leave the closet, and out of the corner of my eye I catch Julian trying to button his fly despite the bulge putting up resistance. However, when our eyes meet, the panic in his subsides, quickly replaced by amusement, even mischief. I detect the hint of a smirk at the corner of his left lip. “Mia,” he greets.

“Hi,” I squeak. “I was, I just, I was going to come to class but I just—I just—Anyway, sorry to accidentally have been hiding in the closet. I’ll just leave and let you guys, umm uhh, continue.”

I turn toward the door, but Tristan practically leaps in front of me. “You’re not going anywhere,” he growls, holding my phone out accusatorially. “You took a video of us? How long have you known about us? What were you planning to do with this blackmail?”

“Blackmail?” I gasp, taken aback. “I’m not trying to blackmail you. Why would I?”

“Then why were you recording us from a supply closet?” Julian asks, bemused.

“I—well…I thought that—at first I thought—I mean, he’s”—I motion to Tristan—“a student and you’re our teacher and so—I thought that you—that it—that you guys—I thought it wasn’t consensual!” I finally get out. Why am I feeling so flustered? “But obviously I was wrong, so…so it doesn’t matter, and I’ll just go and let you guys get back to—to”—I bite my lip and cringe, feeling utterly ridiculous—“to your activities.”

“I wish we could just go back to our activities,” Tristan snarls viciously, “but unfortunately we’ve got to do something about you.”

“I won’t tell anyone!” I stubbornly bite back, rounding on him. “Besides there’s nothing to tell. I thought I was about to see you get raped, and I was trying to give you evidence against your attacker.”

“Fine, maybe you didn’t set out to blackmail us,” Tristan says doubtfully, “but now you’ve got some if you ever do want it, and I can’t have that.”

“Just delete the video,” I say, my heart pounding fast. Julian continues to linger in the periphery, for some reason his pants now seem more unbuttoned rather than less.

“Wish I could, Winters,” Tristan drawls, “but it’s already in the Cloud. It can be retrieved. Maybe you’ve even emailed it to someone else —”

“I told you,” I exasperatedly insist, “I wasn’t blackmailing you! I was trying to protect you—”

“Bullshit,” he growls. “You have blackmail on me now and I need to make sure you never use it!”

“I won’t! I won’t show it to anyone,” I earnestly insist, desperate to just get out of this situation and have the entirely unwelcome throbbing between my legs stop. “I wouldn’t have any reason to; honestly this doesn’t exactly reflect well on me either. I really thought I was about to witness you being raped! I was trying to help you!”

“Do I really seem like I could be a rapist?” Julian asked, his tone light, but his expression unreadable.

“No, not at all!” I turn to look at him. “I just…I was asleep…then at first it just seemed…like…I mean you put a belt in his mouth...” My eyes automatically shift down, again, entirely without my conscious intention, landing on Tristan’s still shamelessly erect penis. I blink very hard and jerk my whole head back up, hoping that—somehow—my slip was not as obvious as I fear.

“Anyway, you’re not, and it wasn’t,” I continue rambling, “so I don’t have any reason to tell or show anyone anything. I don’t care what you guys do behind closed doors. So, I’ll just go.”

Again I try to make for the door. This time it is Julian who moves to stand in my path. “Unfortunately, Tristan is right, we need to make sure you’re not going to show that video to anyone. Regardless of our activities being consensual, I am still Tristan’s teacher—and yours—and that means your little movie could get both of us into quite a bit of trouble. So how are we going to deal with this, Mia?”

Again Julian and Tristan look over my head, at each other. I try to think of something to say, but I don’t think fast enough.

“We need blackmail on her, something to force her to stay silent,” Tristan immediately answers, glaring at me.

“You don’t have anything to blackmail me with!” I instantly object, not liking that idea at all. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You know, you’re really sweaty,” Julian comments, but his eyes aren’t looking anywhere that sweat could be showing. His lips twist upward in an ever-growing smirk, wet, red, and beautiful.

“I—well—I—I mean it’s very hot in here!” I retort, praying I don’t blush. Unfortunately, by no stretch of the imagination, is this statement true. There are even icicles hanging from the eaves above the windows.

I glance from them to the exit, which is, of course, bolted. Tristan is still holding my phone, but I don’t care; I’ll report it stolen and get a new one, or find a way to make him give it back to me later, once I’m no longer stuck in a room with him and Julian. I head toward the door with great determination—mostly determination to get to the door without looking at the bulge in Julian’s pants or the miraculously still-erect penis poking from under Tristan’s shirt.

But Tristan actually bounds across the room and physically blocks the door with his body. “You’re not going anywhere, Winters. We’re going

to need some blackmail on you to guarantee that you won't use what you've got on us."

"Look," I sigh, "I don't have any reason to blackmail you, okay. And I'm…I don't have secret affairs or whatever else to hide, I don't do drugs, I don't do anything. I'm really boring. So I can't really trade blackmail with you."

"You could blackmail me into giving you a good grade," Julian points out.

"I don't need to," I instantly retort, spinning around to face him, offended that he'd even suggest such a thing. "I've gotten an A on every paper!"

"We could get a video of her doing drugs," Tristan suggests, looking over my shoulder at Julian, "do you have any weed on you?"

"Not right now." Julian sighs.

His eyes shift back to me, wandering up and down my torso in a way that is entirely inappropriate. "You know," he smirks seductively, "despite your absences, you do have the highest grade in my class. What ideas does a smart girl like you have for how we resolve this situation?"

"You both take me at my word that I won't tell anyone about you two, let me out of this room, and we all pretend this never happened," I immediately reply.

Tristan sniggers a nasty little snigger.

I spin back around glaring hard at him, ready to give him a piece of my mind but instead my mouth ends up hanging open in shock—he still holds my phone with one hand but the other expertly runs up and down the length of his still-hard, very impressive cock.

"Are you on Viagra or something?" I blurt out. I don't have much experience with penises, but I'm pretty sure maintaining an erection

through all of this has got to be unnatural.

“No.” Tristan smirks. Where there had been anger in his ice-colored eyes there is now mischief. “Apparently, voyeurism isn’t a turnoff for me. I think I have a solution.” His smirk widens. “You’d never risk people thinking you slept your way into good grades, would you, Winters?”

Well that’s not what I expected, but I think I know where he’s going with this, and relief washes through me. “No, I wouldn’t. So don’t worry, I won’t put you through the stress of having anyone think you slept your way into a C average.”

This time Tristan full-on laughs. “No, no, no. That’s not what I meant. I meant I’ll take a video of you two”—he motions to me and to Julian—“having sex.”

My brain instantly compiles a million jumbled rejections, but my body responds differently. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest, the tingling in my legs returns, far more intense than it was before, and more than one of my orifices becomes moist. Despite all of this, I manage to shake my head and say, baffled and flustered, “But, but you’re *gay*.”

Julian and Tristan meet eyes again, Julian lets out an amused little chortle. “How very vanilla of you,” he says, looking at me like I’m something cute and innocent.

“We’re bi,” Tristan corrects me, rolling his eyes.

“Speak for yourself,” Julian says, giving me a spark of hope—*he won’t want to have sex with me anyway.* The aching and throbbing between my legs let me know that not all of me is as thrilled about this as my good rational mind seems to be.

“Fine.” Tristan rolls his eyes again. “Julian prefers the term pan-sexual.”

“Thank you.” Julian nods. Then turns his gaze back to me. His pretty copper eyes glitter under thick black lashes. His lips part and he bites

the very edge of the bottom one. “What do you say, Mia?”

“I—I—I—” My groin says one thing, my head says another, but most of my body seems to be voting for the groin to win. “I—I say that is *coercion*, which is—that is—”

Behind me I feel an arm wrap around my waist and quickly pull me back into flat, hard abs, among other hard things. “Let go of me, Masters!” I squeal, but he doesn’t listen.

He lowers his face into my neck. His lips touch the lobes of my ears as he says, “You’re turned on. Your pupils are dilated, you’re sweating everywhere, and you can’t stop rubbing your thighs together.”

“I am not,” I protest, grabbing his arm to pull it away, but his other hand falls onto my stomach and it barely moves south before my back instinctually arches and my ass is pressed against his erect cock.

His lips trace down my neck. He latches on at the nape and sucks, too hard to be gentle but just soft enough for it to bring pleasure instead of pain. His hand slips down, down, down, down, until his fingers slide into my jeans, into my underwear, and the throbbing in my clit is met by his warm confident palm. Before I can stop myself, a guttural, primal *yop* of arousal escapes my throat.

“You were saying?” Tristan mutters, before drawing his hand out and bringing his fingers, now covered in my juices, to his mouth. Out of the corner of my eye I watch him lick them clean while his other hand takes their place.

“I was saying—that this is—that I am—ahh—am not turned on.” I half-heartedly try to pull away, but unfortunately my joints have turned to jelly and, and—“*ooowwwaahh,”* I accidentally moan, as his palm begins to rub with exactly the right pressure in exactly the right circular motion.

Julian’s eyes grow dark as they deepen with desire. He slowly slinks toward us, his hands unbuttoning his shirt. All I can hear is the pounding in my ears as my heart threatens to explode. *What am I doing?*

Julian is only a few steps away now. Tristan's grip around my middle relaxes. "I—I—I—" I huff, no longer aware of exactly how to convince both them and myself that every part of my body from the neck down has voted to let whatever this is continue.

But it's Tristan Masters doing it to you! A very shrewd internal voice pipes up. And that fact is a hard one for most of me to ignore. No matter how good his hands might feel on my body, he is an egotistical, arrogant asshole who I've never seen be anything that even vaguely resembles kind to anyone.

I lunge forward, this time successfully breaking free of Tristan, only to be caught by Julian. His arms wrap around my waist, locking behind me. He pulls me close, so close that when I look up at him, I can feel his breath on my lips.

"You know, Mia," he whispers, "they say when you're old and nearing death you regret more the things you didn't try than the things you did. Besides"—his eyes flick to my lips—"you learn much more from the experiences you have in college than from the books you're assigned to read." His face gets closer and closer to mine as he talks. He whispers in my ear, "The truth is, we won't actually force you to do anything you don't want to. You can leave if you want. But I want you to stay. There is so much I can teach you if you let me."

My eyes are half closed. My lips part. It seems that even if I can leave, I don't want to nearly as much as I thought I did.

Whatever I may think about Tristan, Julian is…something else. Julian is very, very smart, funny, passionate. I can't pretend that I haven't noticed the musky earthy scent that surrounds him, or felt the unexplainable urge to run my fingers through his beautiful black curls, or temporarily gotten lost in the way his eyelashes brush the edges of his cheekbones when he scribbles a note.

I sink into him, just a little, just a fraction of an inch, but that's enough. His lips are on mine and after a very feeble resistance I melt into them. My arms wind around his neck and when he presses harder into the

kiss, his lips so soft but firm, I have to consciously stop myself from nipping the bottom one. I wonder why this kiss feels so much more electrifying than any kiss I've ever had before.

Julian's tongue swipes the bottom of my lower lip. I press my toes into the ground below, parting my lips and swiping him back with my own tongue. He plunges into my mouth, curling his tongue behind my teeth, letting the tip chase along the roof of my mouth—my clit pulses, my knees lose whatever small amount of solidity they had left. I had no idea there were so many nerves in my mouth, but Julian seems to know where all of them are.

There is a scraping noise in the background. Tristan is moving around. I can't seem to muster whatever it would take to care. I guess that means I'm staying—not so Tristan can have his blackmail, but because parts of me I didn't know existed have suddenly roared to life and they're, apparently, much stronger than the rational mind I so pride myself on having.

Tentatively, my arms slip down Julian's shoulders, one catching in his hair, the other continuing all the way to his chest. His muscle is firm and, well, more abundant, than his usual long-sleeved shirts and sweater-vests suggest. I press my fingers into his hard abs, then slide them back up his neck.

Julian's hands move from my back to my hips. They firmly trail down, slip under my shirt and then trace my skin back up, until they are tickling my rib cage—another place I never knew had so many nerve endings. They move back down, my pelvis curves into his, but when his hands land on my hips, he manages to pull us even tighter together. Another primal moan escapes from me.

Now both of my hands are in Julian's hair, pulling his face closer to mine. His tongue moves faster, and mine moves to match it. I am becoming lost in the sensations I'm feeling, and the ghosts of sensations I want to feel more of. My hands become more frantic, running from his hair down his neck, along his shoulders. I want to melt into him.

Julian trails over my ribs. I instantly cover in goose pimples, devastated with disappointment when his fingers brush over my bra, and my skin is denied the direct contact. Then hands are on my hips again, one sliding down to slip into my jeans while the other tugs at the button above the zipper. These hands cannot be Julian's.

I break our kiss, alarmed, but Julian's hand instantly leaves my breast and gently grabs my jaw, purposefully pulling my mouth back to his. His tongue possessively pushes past mine, then curls around it, shoving it to the roof of his mouth and parting my lips so wide that the corners of them feel like they might rip.

Tristan's hands find the place where my pelvis and my thighs meet. From there he pulls me backward, and again my ass is pressed into his cock. His hands slide to meet in the middle. His fingertips brush the hood of my clit then slide past it between the folds of my labia, which are slick and treacherously welcoming. Before I can stop myself I thrust into his fingers, desperate for the sensation they provide.

Julian's hands wind back under my shirt and up my back. After a few tries, he unlatches my bra clasp. Instantly, his hands come back around and greedily cup my breasts. One of Tristan's hands escapes my jeans and pushes Julian's hand out of the way. Julian concedes.

His displaced hand now falls between us; his fingers hook onto the edges of my jeans, and he pushes them down—just like I watched him push Tristan's down—over my hips, wrapping around to slide them over my ass. I rub my thighs and knees together and my pants and underwear shimmy to the floor.

Julian's hands are back on my hips, his fingers slip into my underwear and they caress and tease without interfering with Tristan's ministrations. Half of me is lost in trying to devour Julian with my tongue, the other half consumed by the terrible wonderful sensation of Tristan's fingers rimming the walls of my entrance.

I push Julian's shirt over his shoulders, down past his elbows. He yanks the sleeves over his wrists and his shirt cascades to the ground. I run

my hands up and down his torso, from lean natural abs up his perfect rib cage, to his chest—broad, hard muscle, with little dips to his collarbone—drawing lines to his Adam's apple, his shoulders, his biceps, down to his forearms, so hard, his hands so long and graceful.

I bring his hands into the space between us, inviting him to touch me where Tristan is touching me. I simultaneously feel like I'm already dying of overstimulation and like there could never be enough sensation to satisfy the hungry creature that's been awoken inside of me. Julian takes my cue, he grabs on to the nub of my clit and pinches it just hard enough that it hurts. However, with the rhythmic circles Tristan is tracing, what might ordinarily have been pain instantly transforms into pleasure. It tugs at some place behind my navel and I instinctually thrust into Tristan's fingers.

Finally, finally, the tips of Tristan's fingers enter me. They circle my inner walls, gradually and mercilessly building pressure. My legs go so weak with pleasure that I am practically hanging off of Julian.

My face is in Julian's neck. My mouth opens and I find my teeth hooked onto the place where his neck meets his shoulder. I bite him just hard enough to make him groan.

Julian's hands, now displaced by Tristan's, travel up, up, up, along my sides, tickling my ribs, skimming my breasts, all the way to my armpits. I realize he's trying to tug my shirt over my head. I grab the edges of the sleeves myself and pull it off for him, along with my bra. My arms are instantly back around his neck, my hands buried in his hair, my lips on his. He nips my lower lip, his arms pull me tight and I melt into him, tantalized by the sensation of bare skin on bare skin.

Tristan's hands abandon my groin and travel up my stomach to cup both my breasts. He catches my nipples between the knuckles of his fingers and yanks gently at them.

It's been a while since I had sex, but now that they've got me worked up in the dance my body seems to remember things my conscious mind never knew it had learned. My hands unravel from Julian's hair and travel down his neck, soon they are buried in a different set of curls.

Tristan suddenly jerks me backward with his grip on my breasts, pulling me away from Julian, then spinning me around. He twirls me right into my armchair. Before I am even able to think he's on his knees, pushing his way between mine. His tongue lands on my inner thighs and races its way up, up, up—and then, like a man dying of thirst he plunges his greedy tongue into my aching folds.

He licks and sucks and licks and sucks, and I am putty in his hands. He grabs my hips and pulls me down so I am even more open to him. Behind him Julian stands watching appreciatively. His eyes move from the back of Tristan's head to my face and his hands travel to the lip of his still unbuttoned pants. He nimbly slips his long elegant hands into his boxer-briefs and grabs ahold of the very hard cock they're hiding.

My eyes roll to the back of my head as an electrifying jolt travels from my clit through my belly all the way up to my heart—Tristan and his tongue have just uncovered the exact perfect angle to attack from. I twist my head to the side and look at him. His ice-colored eyes stare hard at me from beneath thick black lashes. He ceases his perfectly rhythmic lapping just long enough to smirk at me, letting me know that he knows he's got me —resistance is futile, if he keeps going, orgasm is imminent. Then he returns to his work without holding back.

Electric sugar runs through my belly and my thighs and spreads to the rest of my body. The sensation is so overwhelming that for a minute I go numb and squeeze my legs together, forcing Tristan's head back. He resists. His hands leave my hips, grab my thighs and push them farther apart, His tongue leaves my clit. It trails down and sinks back into my cave, tracing the entrance in a slow tantalizing circle that gradually builds.

Again, he finds a perfect rhythm, and a whole other kind of electric surge is released—one I didn't even know existed.

It builds and it builds. Breathing becomes panting. My toes curl. The relentlessly perfect circular motion of his tongue never stops and that throbbing ache grows stronger and stronger. My hands grab the back of his neck and my ass muscles clench together, arching my pelvis upward, forcing his tongue deeper and deeper.

I moan and a hand slips into my open mouth and gently compresses my tongue. I open my eyes.

Julian stands above me with a good-natured smirk and one finger placed in front of his lips. “Shhh,” he whispers. I watch as his hand leaves those pouty lips and grasps his erect penis. It is thick and long, but not so long as to promise pain. He does not remove his other hand from my tongue, nor his eyes from mine.

Tristan’s circles continue, pulling me back to the brink of orgasm. The pressure of Julian’s fingers on my tongue, the sight of him leisurely stroking his cock only inches from my face, adds fuel to the fire Tristan has already set ablaze. I am absolutely certain that I have never been so turned on.

I find myself wishing that Julian would mount the chair so his knees straddle my shoulders and I could take his cock into my mouth. As I picture it happening that is all it takes to send me over the edge. The throbbing culminates in a huge burst of released energy and a wild growl escapes from deep in my gut and transforms into feral snarls.

The pulse of the orgasm echoes through me with every heartbeat. My body simultaneously begs me to pull Tristan’s smirking face right back between my legs and to smack his thumb away, because even the gentlest brush against my clit is too intense right now. I have never ever had an orgasm like that before, and judging from the cat-that-caught-the-canary grin on Tristan’s face, I’m pretty sure that prick knows it.

Tristan stands up and steps away. Julian quickly takes his place. He kneels between my legs but he only takes one long deliberate lick all the way from my perineum up into my labia, hooking his tongue just inside my still pulsing vagina. Then he pulls away, tempered lust and appreciation in his warm eyes.

He turns to Tristan. His hands leave my thighs and land on Tristan’s angular jawbone. They slide up and weave through Tristan’s platinum blond hair, gripping him at the base of his head. Tristan’s hands latch onto Julian’s

neck in the exact same spot and, like two expert dancers, they twist their heads together, closing the space between them.

I have recovered enough to worm myself into a sitting position. I watch captivated as they push and pull at each other's lips, tantalized by the ebb and flow of their tongues as neither concedes dominance, yet neither appears to be demanding it. I have also recovered enough for my body to scream out, like an addict, for more of what it's just had.

As if they can read my mind they pull apart and both of them look right at me, devious smirks gracing their well-kissed lips.

"Dibs on front," Julian says. I don't know what this means, but his hands are on my left thigh and a microsecond later Tristan's are on my right. They pull me down and I slide out of the chair, but I don't hit the floor.

Julian catches me around the waist and pulls me into another kiss. I can't believe I'm not only kissing my devilishly handsome TA, but I'm kissing him naked in the philosophy lounge while Tristan Masters watches. For a moment I have a sort of out-of-body experience, where I see what is happening the way I will see it once my rational mind is back in control, but until then…

Tristan slides backward onto a nearby couch, situates himself in the middle and takes ahold of his thick cock, slowly stroking it. For a microsecond I experience the impulse to break away from Julian and shove Tristan's cock down my throat. Instead I shut my eyes and kiss Julian back aggressively, determined to lose my desire to devour Tristan's cock by substituting it for Julian's seductive tongue and suckable lips.

Julian wraps his arms around my torso and pulls me into a standing position without breaking our kiss. His knee lightly knocks into mine and I step back a few inches. His other knee does the same and I step back a few more. Again. Again.

My legs collide with couch cushions. Hands slide up the outer edges of my thighs, moving up to my ass. Tristan's thumbs press into the pocket

of flesh where my inner thighs become ass. His fingers squeeze at my cheeks. These squeezes become rhythmic, circular, almost massage-like. So much so that I am barely aware of his thumbs slowly moving upward and inward—until they brush my asshole, that is.

Julian's hands lace through my hair, his palms grasp the bone under my ears, twisting my neck so he can enter my mouth deeper. I relax into him, but it doesn't stop me from being acutely aware of Tristan leaning forward. Of his hot breath as it tickles the very sensitive skin he's exposed. Of the tip of his nose sliding over the little point of my tailbone. Of his tongue, wet and confident, landing on my hole.

Slowly, so torturously slowly, he licks upward and pulls away. My pelvic muscles pulse hungrily in response. No one has ever touched that part of my body before. I am nervous, but a whole new rush of juices leak down my thighs so I can't deny, to either them or myself, that I like it.

To my unfamiliar delight Tristan dives right back in, this time harder, licking circles around my rim. Slowly he pokes the tip of his tongue inside. Again, I am clinging to Julian, dependent on him to hold me up because Tristan has turned my body to jelly. I groan as the pleasure he's building becomes so strong that I have to fight the urge to fall backward onto his cock and grind it into oblivion.

Julian's hands wander to my hips. He digs his thumbs into them and gently pushes down, as if he has heard my silent fantasies. I land in Tristan's lap, his hard cock between my thighs.

At this point I am so spun up that I no longer care that Tristan is a loathsome asshat, I only care that he's proven more than capable of making me come, and I need the intense ache in my loins to be quenched.

I reach between my legs and grab his dick, but he snatches it away. His other hand grabs my hip and guides me down. I follow, but it is not my pussy that he brushes the tip of his cock across.

I jump up, alarmed. I know I was just enjoying his tongue on my ass, but that's quite different than his very large penis going all the way into

that part of my body. Tristan's hands grasp my hips and try to pull me back down, but I resist. Julian stands in front of us, watching.

"Don't worry I have lube," Tristan mutters, his voice husky and impatient.

"No, I mean I don't—I've never—I don't do that."

"There's a first time for everything," he replies, obviously turned on. His tongue is back on my ass. The soft warm sensation melts me. For a second some part of me opens to the idea of anal—but not now. Not like this. Not with him.

"No. I'm just not—" He plunges the tip of his tongue only millimeters into my hole—but inside those few millimeters are millions of nerve endings and now all of them are electrified. A deep moan escapes from my gut.

Julian closes what little space there was between us. He bends his head and captures one of my nipples in his mouth, the other between his fingers. He sucks at my nipple hard, way harder than my high-school boyfriend ever did. It hurts, but there is something behind the pain, and that something is making my clit pulse aggressively.

He takes his hand off my breast and reaches between my legs. He hooks his fingers so my clit is perfectly squeezed between them, and then plunges the tips inside of me. *"Aaaahhhh…"* I practically weep.

I am so titillated by sensation that I legitimately don't know the difference between pleasure and torture. The only thing stopping me from bucking into Julian's fingers until half his arm is inside of me is the knowledge that doing so might mean Tristan cannot keep eating my ass out. So I settle for trying to keep myself standing while Julian's fingers grow faster and fall into time with Tristan's licks.

The pressure is building so quickly—more quickly than I ever could have imagined possible. I'm so close. I surrender to the wonderful inevitability awaiting me—utterly lost in the euphoria between my legs.

And then, all at once, it stops. Tristan pulls his tongue away, and grabs onto my hips, pulling me back down. As a result, Julian loses his grip on my nipple and my pussy, and I moan at the loss. Again, Tristan flicks his dick at my asshole and this time the head is slippery with lube.

My alarm flares again. I just don't feel ready, or right, or safe, or something—I don't know what it is, I just know it is telling me that no matter how good a tongue feels I am not ready to have cock in my ass.

"No," I say again, pulling away.

"Come on, Winters," Tristan growls, his hands now gripping my ass cheeks roughly. "How often in your life are you going to get to have two cocks in you at once?"

Before I can reply, Julian's calm, calculating eyes find mine. His hand gently wraps around the back of my neck. "It's okay." He smiles, and I melt again.

He wraps a strong, confident arm around my waist and pulls me back toward him, lifting me off the couch, then swinging me around so that I am pressed between him and the old, solid mahogany conference table in the middle of the room.

"Fuck," Tristan groans.

Julian pushes his palms into my hips and, taking the cue, I slide myself up onto the table. I am acutely aware that my legs are spread and his cock is pointed right between them. He leans in and twists his neck so that it is my cheek he catches with his feather-light kiss. He leaves another on my jaw. Another on my neck. His hands slide down my back, pulling me to the very edge of the table. My legs wrap around his waist, his lips trace down my torso, my back arches, and slowly he lowers me back onto the table.

On a bed of old newspapers and academic journals I slide backward, and Julian climbs up, following me. I push myself back until both his knees are on the table and his head lands between my legs. He takes my labia into

his mouth and gently sucks and licks at my lips, drinking the juices of my last orgasm. I let my head roll back as my mind again slips into oblivion and the primal urges of my body grab hold of me.

Julian does not bring me to the pinnacle of oblivion though. I hear the faint rip of a paper packet being opened—a condom. I feel his thigh brush mine, and I open my eyes to see his only inches away. His hand is next to my ear supporting his weight, while the other wraps under my left thigh, hoisting it up. He leans down as if to kiss me but his lusty eyes are locked on mine. His lips quirk upward at the edge and—and—

"Mmmmm!" I softly cry as his thick cock plunges into me.

I eagerly spread my legs, and my toes curl in satisfaction as he sinks deeper. My pelvic muscles clench at the base of his cock, ready to devour it. Oddly he doesn't move, he just watches me, patient, knowing, amused. I am so aroused by the combination of the confidence in his warm eyes and the feeling of being stretched out and filled by him that I cannot resist the instinct to twist my hips and grind up into his pelvis.

His eyes roll back and his grin transforms into a moan. From around my thigh his hand travels up to grip my hip and he thrusts without ever pulling out, grinding deeper and deeper into me. Moans of ecstasy seep out of me.

I have never been filled like this before. I have never been with a boy who has control like this. My ex-boyfriend was always frantically thrusting and quick to come and exhausted immediately afterward. Julian though, Julian is…is…

I moan again. He pulls out just a little, and when he thrusts back into me the tip of his cock causes a feeling I've never experienced before. It tickles a soft tender spot, a spot that in the past I've only felt because it's been prematurely hammered, causing pain. Now though, it bubbles with a pleasure that spreads throughout my middle and down my legs.

Julian sets a rhythm that teases pulsing bursts of ecstasy out of me. I let my hips pivot in response to his, clenching my ass muscles together,

squeezing his cock as it slides between my walls. Slowly, the intensity of the sensations builds. My body is working its way into orgasm but—

A massive thrust comes out of nowhere.

"Aaaaggghhh!" Julian rasps. I open my eyes to see his face twisted up in an expression of pain and pleasure. My body responds with its own silent moan of despair. *He came already,* I think, letting my eyes slide shut. I guess it was just too good to be true.

Then… "Fuck," Tristan moans, and I feel another thrust.

My eyes open again. Pale fingers peek over the bones of Julian's hips, a fraction of a hair away from my thighs. I follow those fingers up their arms and crane my neck up. I see platinum hair bobbing and then Julian's cock is shoved even deeper into me, and I realize what has happened: Tristan has climbed on the table and is fucking Julian in the ass.

Julian, his cock still buried deep inside of me, continues to release guttural moans. He sucks and bites at his lower lip to mute them. I lean up, weave my fingers through his curls and pull his lips down to meet mine. He eagerly obliges, plunging his tongue into my mouth desperately. Ecstasy radiates off him, and it is contagious.

Tristan thrusts again, and Julian's cock is shoved even deeper into me, spreading my legs apart. I gasp into Julian's lips, actually able to feel the sensitive skin just above my perineum rip a little. However as Tristan thrusts again, and then again, the pain actually adds to the pleasure that has resumed building inside of me.

As Julian lowers himself onto his elbows, his knees sink farther apart, spreading my thighs with them. His hands lace into my hair and he kisses me deeper. I moan, grinding my pussy into his cock, falling into rhythm with Tristan as the two of us fuck Julian beyond the point of no return.

I cannot believe how turned on I am by this. I have never been so fully present in the experience of sex. I have never had the running

commentary in my mind be silent because all of me is so utterly absorbed in a moment.

Julian breaks our kiss and bites the crook of my neck, sucking desperately at my skin. I grind onto him harder. With one hand I reach out beyond my hips, beyond his hips, and grab as much of Tristan's ass as I can. Tristan takes my cue and thrusts even harder. As we fall closer and closer into sync Julian's moans grow more frequent, his breath more raspy and frantic.

The throbbing between my legs grows more and more intense as well. I squeeze and pump at Julian's cock, but my eyes are on Tristan. His eyes are closed, his lips pulled back in a feral snarl as his legs move up and down, sliding his cock in and out and in and out and in and out of Julian's pert, spread asshole.

Watching him, watching both of them, fuck is turning me on mentally even more than the amazing sensation of Julian's thick cock forcing my pussy open, rubbing against my G-spot, of his pelvis grinding into my clit…For the first time in my life I am actually have to consciously stop myself from coming.

Even so, I don't think I be able to hold back much longer. I close my eyes and look away from Tristan, but that just makes it harder not to focus on the pressure building inside my walls. My muscles are utterly exhausted but I absolutely cannot bring myself to stop bucking my hips and curling my ass, needing to feel Julian's cock penetrate me deeper and deeper.

Julian releases a constant stream of moans into my neck, and his fingers claw at the table next to my head. Tristan whispers, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," under his breath as his thrusts grow more frantic.

Of its own accord my body increases my pace to match. Bucking and grinding, the building pressure begins to give way to the first tremors of release. My eyes slip open just in time to see Tristan's head roll back, his snarl transformed into a silent gasp of ecstasy. This is the last straw…

My legs go straight and tighten, my fingers dig into Tristan's ass mercilessly, the walls of my pussy squeeze desperately around the base of Julian's cock. The pleasure grows so intense that it is indistinguishable from pain. An explosion occurs deep in my core, and my entire body is racked with tremors of ecstasy.

"Aaaaggggghhh!" I yell, not caring if the entire Philosophy Department hears me and comes bursting in.

"Fuuuuccckkk!" Tristan groans at exactly the same time Julian half hisses and half growls some indistinguishable word.

Julian, utterly spent from coming inside of me while Tristan came inside of him, melts, his chest melding into mine. My pussy pumps and pumps and pumps Julian's cock, instinctively milking it for every last drop of come. Each clench sends an intense burst of achy pleasure coursing through my veins, making me greedy for more.

I grind up into Julian just a few more times and squeeze Tristan's ass even tighter. Another thrust, another, I am so close to coming again…

Tristan slides out of Julian almost completely, then, with great force, thrusts hard back into him, causing Julian to pump into me, and that is all it takes—*"Aaaaaayyyyyyyy!"*

Julian catches me in another kiss. I open my mouth, eager to entwine our tongues, to suffocate with him as my pussy convulses with the aftershocks of a third orgasm.

Tristan pulls back, and the table creaks under his shifting weight. My clamped hands somehow release his ass cheeks and fall limp onto the table. I cannot feel them, nor my toes, nor any part of me that is not currently merged with Julian.

Julian lifts his face up, and his half-open eyes find mine. He smiles at me and I smile back. The oxytocin flooding my brain tells me I want to nuzzle into him and fall asleep. His fingers brush my forehead, pushing

mussed hair back. He kisses me in a way that could only be described as tender—I'm going to blame that on oxytocin too.

The sound of a belt sliding through loops interrupts my fluffy thoughts.

"Well," Tristan drawls, only the tiniest hint of physical exertion in his voice, "I've got my blackmail then. Nice doing business, Winters."

Out of the corner of my eye I see Tristan grab two phones from where he's propped them on a chair. He hits the stop record button first on his, then on mine.

This snaps me out of my hormone-induced deceptive bliss. I push against Julian's chest lightly. He props himself up, causing his dick to slide out of me, leaving me feeling deflated, empty.

Julian lets me up, but he does not move to get dressed right away. I catch his eyes, still warm and thoughtful. I look away quickly. Reality is flooding back to me, and it's not pretty.

I just had sex with my TA while the most loathsome person I've ever met fucked him in the ass on the conference table of the Philosophy Department lounge, and the whole thing was recorded on not one, but two phones. *Why did Tristan even record it on my phone? Why didn't I set up a password? How the hell did any of this happen?*

That's right, I remind myself, *because I slept through a discussion section and didn't want to get caught. I'm so dumb.*

I spring up off the table and start dashing around the room, zigzagging back and forth as I spot articles of clothing. I don't see my underwear anywhere, and I don't want to take the time to find them so I put my pants on without them. My fingers are shaking too much to properly clasp my bra and I don't want either of them to see that, so I settle for a single hook and throw my shirt on over it. One of my socks is inside out when I shove my left foot into it—also not a concern at the moment.

“Calm down, Mia.” Julian chuckles. My head whips toward him, I wonder if I look as much like a trapped rabid animal as I feel. He blinks at me like a cat, a soft, easy smirk on his lips.

“I am calm,” I reply. “I just—I just…like he said.” I nod in Tristan’s vague direction, absolutely refusing to look at him. “Blackmail, done. So now”—I start looking around the room again, certain there must be something for me to busy myself with—“now, I have things to do. So I have to leave.” *Ah!* I remember. *My backpack!*

I practically leap back into the closet, sling my bag over one shoulder, and head for the door, staying as close to the wall, and as far away from Julian and Tristan, as I can. “So, yeah, I, like I said, things to do. So… so I’m leaving. Bye.”

I slide back the bolt and open the door, my heart pounding. I am more than halfway on the other side of it, almost free—but then—

“Don’t you want your phone?” Tristan drawls, obviously amused—the smug prick.

I spin back around, march right up to him, snatch my phone out of his hands, give him a harsh glare, and, in one fluid motion, pivot so I am back en route to the door.

“See you in class tomorrow!” Julian calls after me. I have no idea how to evaluate that statement right now. I let the door swing shut behind me then practically run down three flights of stairs and out of the hall.

What the hell is wrong with me? I ask myself over and over again as I walk across campus, so fast that I would look to anyone like I must have a purpose, like I must have a place to be. In reality though, I don’t know where I am going and I don’t care. I’m just walking as fast as possible because, well, because I’m silently freaking out and there’s no way I can tell anyone about this—not even Leanne, my roommate and best friend. *Especially not Leanne!* I correct myself. *She’s had a crush on Julian since they met.*

I walk my familiar route around the block, but no matter how much or how fast I walk, I can’t escape from the echoes of insanely intense orgasms as they ricochet inside of me. Nor can I un-feel Julian’s kisses, or lick away the metallic taste of his blood from me biting his lip too hard. I also can’t un-see the way Tristan’s face twisted up as he came hard in Julian’s ass—it’s probably the only honest expression I’ve ever seen on his face.

What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

Drop the class! screams the part of me that is full-on panicking. *Drop the whole major!*

I can’t do that, it’s week four of the semester, the more rational side of me responds, *and I’m nearly halfway through junior year—I can’t change my major.*

Fuck! Is all any part of me can come up with in response. I am so screwed, in more ways then one. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Why did I do that?

I could have put up much more of a fight. I could have screamed and run and thrown something--my shoe?--through a window to draw the attention of anyone who might be passing by. I could have--I could have said no, just like Julian said… But I didn't.

Why didn’t you? My brain demands.

Because I was turned on? Because they're both beautiful--loathsome, in the case of Tristan, but beautiful? Because their hands felt good enough to make me want to know what the rest of them felt like?

Am I really just a base primal creature? I've always seen myself as an intellectual, as someone who makes decisions based on logic and reason… But it turns out, I'm not. I'm just like a chimpanzee during mating season--all incoherent noises and rutting.

I'm glad Julian at least thought to use a condom; I didn't. I might have had my whole life ruined by one stupid decision if he weren't able to remember sex-ed basics. So much for middle-school health classes and all my father's fear mongering--turns out that just goes out the door as soon as beautiful boys touch me in the right places. I really am just a chimp.

— Tristan —

After Mia leaves, Julian and I go our separate ways without saying much. We both have places to be and now we're late. That was supposed to be a quick jack-off fuck, but thanks to Mia Winters and her weird closet-dwelling ways, it turned into something much more—much more time-consuming, that is.

I've fucked women before, lots of them. Hell, I've even fucked women with Julian before. Mia Winters is nothing special. I mean, she's a surprisingly good kisser, and her naked ass is nice to look at, but, really nothing special.

Still, I spend the entirety of Normative Ethics thinking about the video in one pocket and the bunched-up panties she left behind in the other. I fiddle with the panties. I want to watch the video. I want to see what that smartass little bitch looked like when I made her come with my tongue. It's like this nagging at the back of my brain that keeps triggering a pull in my cock.

When lecture finally ends I walk out the front door intending to get back to my dorm as soon as possible, but right outside stands Theo Redwood.

“Masters!” Theo greets, jovial, smarmy, and confident.

“Redwood,” I reply, just as jovially, effortlessly slipping on the correct mask—laid back, but in control, superior and exclusionary to all but a select few, and Theo Redwood certainly is one of those few. Casually, I assume the familiar stance of non-aggressive dominance and ask, “Here for Dr. Bogner?”

“Not at all. Was hoping you could join Chase Locke and I for a little study session.”

“When?” I ask, knowing that the answer won’t matter, I’ve got no choice but to say yes—after all, Tap Night is fast approaching.

He looks at his left wrist, making a show of pulling his sleeve back to flash his Philippe Patek watch. *Mine is nicer,* I internally sneer. I look forward to the end of selection and induction. As soon as I’m officially a member of the Brotherhood there will be no need to suck up to Theo.

“Let’s see…” He whistles. “Right about now.”

“Now is perfect,” I reply with a delighted grin, even though it isn’t and even though I’m not.

—

Several hours later—during which absolutely no studying has been done—I have gone from bored to desperately sick of this particular informal, unacknowledged interview session. These shenanigans are necessary, but three hours is more than enough for one day. I manage to bite my tongue until Chase finishes his long drawn-out yarn about banging a B-list celebrity, but the second the obligatory round of fake laughter ends, I lie and say my mother has been in town shopping and wants me to meet her for dinner.

After walking a few blocks in the direction of the shopping district, I double back to Julian’s apartment. I really hope he’s home because all this time thoughts of banging Mia Winters, or at least watching the video of

Julian banging her, have continued to invade my mind and my dick. I absolutely need to drop a load, preferably into his mouth, or I'm going to go crazy.

He's not home. Shit. I quickly shoot him a text saying, "I'm at your apartment," then I strip out of my clothes and get into the shower. I can handle waiting fifteen minutes or so for him to get home—but God I hope he doesn't dawdle.

– Julian –

If I'd put as much effort into listening as I do into nodding with the utmost fascination and enthusiasm, then I might actually have something to say when Dr. Monroe says, "You've been rather quiet this afternoon Mr. Roth, any thoughts you'd like to share?"

"To be honest, Professor," I answer, smiling sheepishly, "I don't feel that I've digested the material well enough to comment. Eagleton's succinctness so starkly paints the picture of what moralists have danced around for so long that it has knocked the wind out of me."

Dr. Monroe nods thoughtfully. "Yes, very wise, very wise. It is the fool who believes he ever digests the words of another well enough to be worthy of comment. Yet, I've made a good career being such a fool." With this he turns his bulbous eyes to my classmates, as if scolding them for not being equally speechless. This is not really favoritism, I just have a knack for being inoffensive to almost everyone.

I feel a vibration in my pocket and glance at the clock. Seventeen more minutes. I have a feeling it's Tristan. Undoubtedly saying something discreet and vague that will really mean, *I need to talk to you now*. He always does when new situations present themselves, and this morning's escapades certainly were new and unexpected.

Tristan and I have taken women to bed with us before, for fun, for sport, just to see if we can…But Tristan has known Mia since their freshman year,

and she's been under his skin from the moment they met. I can see why—she is honest, blunt, not caught in the realm of superficiality, where so many people remain, lost and lifeless and desperate. She is like a rare mineral that has no idea of her own value. How fortunate that we got to excavate her today.

I already know I want to again, and Tristan probably will too, although I'm sure the way he will show it is by denying it and feigning indifference. We've known each other for five years, I know his patterns. He hates to show he wants or cares about anything. He knows that other people can use his desires against him.

Having met his family, I understand what an outsider looking in might call paranoia. It makes me want to protect him all that much more, but I don't think he needs protecting from Mia Winters. I think she is an anomaly that needs to be explored, by both of us.

I'm a fairly monogamous creature myself. I had a girlfriend when I met Tristan, but that was already fizzling. Since then, I've never felt that lurch of captivation for anyone but him—except Mia.

I met her during her sophomore year, my first year working as a teacher's assistant. She was so matter-of-fact in her arguments, so unaware of her own natural brilliance, so vibrant because she was coming only from a place of honesty, not pretension, like so many students at Yale do. Every time her eyes left mine, mine wanted to stay on her; I had to consciously keep myself from staring.

Tristan noticed, and he gave me hell for it, and I told him that feeling an attraction to her did not change the way I felt for him. He simmered and simmered on. Eventually I realized it wasn't out of jealousy; it was because he felt the same way.

So when the stars aligned today—when she happened to be there, so obviously turned on by what she'd seen—how could I spit in the face of fate? Tristan's paranoia even worked in our favor, although I was certain at first that it couldn't possibly, but it did.

What did that say about Mia that she consented to his need for mutual blackmail? That she was practical? That she was compassionate? That she would have done anything to escape that room? I don't know, but I want to find out.

I want to find out so much more about her. I want to find out where she grew up, and what books she read, and when she had her first kiss, and what her ass tastes like, because I didn't get to find that out today. Now I've just got to find a way to do it. I'll have to feel it out.

Dr. Monroe finally calls an end to today's discussion. I wait until I am out of the room to look at my phone. Sure enough it's a text from Tristan, telling me he's at my apartment. I know what that means, and my lower anatomy is already stirring to life.

– Tristan –

I get out of the shower, wrap a towel around my waist, and go sit on the couch to wait. My phone tells me it's 6:43—a whole twenty-two minutes after I texted Julian. I am going to fuck him so hard for making me wait. Literally.

At 6:52 the door opens and I've already caved. I'm three minutes into the video—right at the part where Julian's got Mia's shirt off—and I've got my nose in her panties. My dick is hard, but I've managed to avoid going for the lotion. I hastily press pause and give Julian the best surly stare I can muster, which probably would be more effective if I wasn't wearing cotton briefs on my face. "What took—actually, I don't care. Come here."

Julian's eyes flick from mine to my hard-on, to the panties and the phone, then back. He smirks at me, in that way that I hate, that way that says he knows me far too well. He puts his messenger bag down and takes his time pulling his scarf off. "Maybe I don't have time," he teases, "I've got papers to grade, you know."

“Get over here now or I will fuck you so hard that you bleed,” I growl.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” he chortles back, but he slinks over nonetheless, his eyes glittering like those of a hungry cat. I fucking love that Julian is as constantly horny as I am.

“You know,” he says, as he sinks to his knees, “about earlier. You don’t actually have any blackmail on Mia Winters. That video will incriminate you along with her, so it’s useless as a bargaining chip.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I reply, affecting the most nonchalant air I possess. “It will incriminate her which will be enough to keep her from blabbing.”

“Still, that’s pretty sloppy of you, given what’s at stake.” His hands slide up my thighs, under my towel. “And sloppy is unlike you.”

“Thank you for pointing out the obvious.” I groan, letting my head roll back.

“You just couldn’t resist her, could you?” Julian continues. I don’t have to look at him—I can hear him smirking at me.

“I could have,” I snark, “I just didn’t want to.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I told you before we even went into the lounge,” I respond, getting sick of this, “I was fucking horny as hell.”

Julian quirks an eyebrow. “*Was* horny?”

My eyes meet Julian’s. They promise that devious mischief we do so well together, if only I hit the ball back.

My eyes dart to his lips, and I swear they are still swollen from that hot little priss’s kisses. My groin pulses as the memory of watching the two

of them fuck manifests in my mind's eye. Fuck. Fuck. Fine. I'll hit the ball back.

"Past tense may not be appropriate," I admit.

I glance back at my phone, at the play-video icon staring back at me, tempting my thumb, only an inch away. My other hand wanders under my towel and pulls Julian's fingers up, off my thighs and onto my balls. "You know, you never finished blowing me."

"You're going to imagine fucking her the whole time I'm sucking you off, aren't you?" he asks, as he slowly pulls the towel off me, grinning like a smartass cat that caught the canary.

I respond by weaving my fingers through his hair and yanking his head down onto my cock. His mouth opens automatically and I thrust into it hard, hitting the back of his throat, not caring if his cocky ass gags.

He responds quickly though, his tongue lapping up and down my length, while his lips reach closer to my base. I feel his fingers move up my thighs and slide around my balls, squeezing them exactly to the right tightness. *God damn*, I think as I groan, feeling my cock grow harder and harder under his expert ministrations.

I have not forgotten the phone in my other hand though. With my thumb I slide the universal sound switch into the off position. I glance back at Julian—his eyes are closed and he's got my cock buried so deep in his throat that even if they were open all he'd be able to see is my pubes. I bring my thumb back to the play button, then slide along the time-line until I'm about halfway through.

On the tiny screen I watch myself eat out Mia's ass while Julian fingers her. Julian's mouth slides up and down, up and down over my cock. His rhythmic sucking grows longer and harder, and with it, so does the tightness in my balls.

I watch Mia refuse me anal. I watch Julian swing her around and put her up on the conference table. I watch him climb on top of her and stick his

dick into her delicious pussy—I can still taste the ghost of it in my mouth. I see myself climb onto the table behind Julian and grab his hips.

I thrust upward, interrupting Julian's rhythm, unable to hold back as I watch myself slip my dick into his ass. Julian takes me even deeper into his throat, sliding me in and out faster and harder. He and I fall into a new rhythm on the couch, while I watch the three of us fall into a rhythm on screen.

As I watch myself fuck him, and him fuck her, and her losing control as she grinds into him, I imagine our positions reversed—I imagine that it is me in the middle, fucking her undoubtedly tight pussy, while Julian pumps his cock into my ass, hitting my prostate exactly the way he knows I like. I thrust up into Julian's throat, so close to release, and imagine that it is her hot little pussy I'm about to pour my seed into.

"Aaaagghhh, fuuuucckkk!" I moan as I suddenly explode into Julian's mouth. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mutter, my toes curling, as he sucks up and swallows my load of come.

I drop the phone and close my eyes, but it doesn't stop me from seeing Mia Winters's face as she came on my tongue. I really can still taste her in my mouth, and I want to taste more. *Fuck.*

Julian leans back and wipes the corners of his mouth. We stare at each other, both taking several deep breaths. Lust swirls in his eyes, and I know that these moments for breathing are merely a hiatus.

"You know," I say, trying to sound like I'm just musing out loud, "you're right that I don't have proper blackmail. And, now that I've had a little bit of time to think it through, that really is a problem."

"Well, maybe we should fix that," Julian replies, his eyes glimmering knowingly, both amused and aroused.

"Yes," I agree, already fantasizing about all the ways we might fix it, "maybe we should."

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Part Two

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— Mia —

In Dr. Bogner's lecture the next morning I make sure that I am sitting on the left so that Leanne will block the area where the TAs always sit from my line of sight. Luckily Tristan is seated in the back as usual, so it will be easy to avoid looking at him. I have no idea whether or not he's looking at me because I stubbornly refuse to turn my head more than fifteen degrees in any direction—I absolutely do not want that twat thinking that I have been thinking about him.

I keep my resolve throughout the entire lecture, but by the end, when everyone is stuffing their laptops back into cases and the shuffle to the exit has begun, I sneak a glance at each of them.

To my simultaneous relief and disappointment neither of them is looking my direction. Tristan is talking to a senior named Theo. Julian is patiently fielding the never-ending questions of Heather Pemberly in the front of the room. I slip out the door without either of them even noticing.

"Who are you looking for?" Leanne asks.

"I—no one. I just thought maybe I left my coffee."

"You didn't have coffee." She laughs.

"Really?" I laugh back, maybe a little too enthusiastically. "Obviously evidence that I need coffee!" Then, for good measure, I fake a yawn, which conveniently turns into a real one halfway through.

—

We head over to Atticus Coffee Shop and get in line with everyone else unlucky enough to be awake at nine a.m. We talk and laugh and go about the day pretty much as normal, except that I have to constantly fight the urge to look around.

I want to look around Atticus, look around the walkways as we go from class to class, look around the Thai restaurant we go to for dinner, even though I've never seen either Julian or Tristan in it. I keep having the urge to look around, just in case. By the end of the day I feel neurotic and I hate myself a little.

—

The weekend comes and goes. Even though Tristan's dorm is only three doors down from mine I don't see him Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. On Monday I pass Julian on the way to class and he smiles politely, the same way he has all semester. On Tuesday in lecture there is no sign that either of them is even aware I am in the same room.

I know I told myself the best thing to do would be to pretend it never happened, and hope they would too, and I don't necessarily disagree with myself…but I also feel like I'm going insane. So, when eleven a.m. rolls around and Leanne leaves for her Political Theory class, I decide that I have to do anything other than sit in Atticus and pretend not to look at the door every time it opens. I opt for doing what I've always done in the past when I need to rediscover sanity—I go to Stoeckel Hall to play a piano.

Stoeckel Hall is very different than Connecticut Hall. It is home to the School of Music, full of artists experiencing life through sound, rather than intellectuals experiencing life through words. Although the rooms are pretty well soundproofed, if you lean against the door of a practice room, you're bound to hear something beautiful. At least I am. I feel bad for the people who happen to hear me playing.

I find an empty practice room at the end of the hall, where I am less likely to be discovered. Technically, these rooms are only for students in the School of Music. Luckily, I've only been caught a few times and only had the rule enforced on me once.

I drop my bag on the floor, slide onto the bench, and gently open the lid. My fingers fall onto the keys like familiar friends. Without any need for conscious thought they spread out, lifting in the right spots, pressing down in others, and the sweet, sad sound of an A-minor chord surrounds me.

My fingers scale up and down, somehow knowing which notes to land on to express the things I don't have words for. I am off time, with several fumbles, but this simple act organizes my brain. I feel peace, like I am floating, my mind carried by the sound the way the body is carried by waves in the ocean.

E-major, D, G, B#. A-minor, C#, E. So this is what it is. This is what I'm feeling.

Behind me the door opens. I ignore it—it's fairly common to be walked in on, but there's an unspoken rule, understood by pretty much everyone in Stoeckel Hall, to automatically leave if you commit such an infraction. The door does indeed shut a moment later and I continue playing.

Then terrible invasive clapping interrupts me.

Startled, I instantly swivel around. Tristan Masters stands, his weight shifted so his left hip juts out, continuing to clap, slow and loud. Behind him, Julian stands, his eyes on the keys my fingers have just left.

"Did you follow me here?" I snap, startled not only by them, but by the instant pulsing throb between my thighs—it's like my heart has just dropped into my panties.

Tristan and Julian both give me slightly confused stares. "Obviously," Tristan answers.

"What do you want?" I sigh.

"Turns out we have a problem," Tristan says, actually examining his fingernails as he speaks. "See, unfortunately, I'm in that video too, so it's useless as blackmail. I'm going to need you to fuck Julian again, only this time, I'll stay off camera."

I turn fully around on the bench now and look at him. He says it so nonchalantly, like fucking people on command is just an ordinary part of life. It's so ridiculous that a burst of laughter bubbles up inside of me. I try

to suppress it but it is so powerful that a giant snort accidentally bursts out of my face.

After a few deep breaths, during which they just stand watching me, I say, “I’m not going to fuck people just because you want me to. Once was a mistake, but I learned from it and I’m not doing it again.”

“A mistake?” Julian says, his face dropping just a bit.

I sigh. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean…It’s not that it was unpleasant. It was, it was very pleasant actually, it’s just…it’s just that I can’t…I’m not really…”

“That kind of girl?” he supplies.

“No. I mean, yeah. I’m not. I mean, I’ve only ever had one boyfriend and—”

“Blah blah blah,” Tristan cuts me off, “that’s nice and all, but I’m going to need proper blackmail, so get over it and take off your knickers.”

“You are such an asshat.” I glare at him, wishing I’d come up with something cleverer. Unfortunately, being jerked out of one’s private world is a bit discombobulating, and discombobulated is a state that rather interferes with clever.

“I am,” he smirks, apparently taking my words as a compliment, “and I can’t have my extracurricular activities coming to light, so, being that I am indeed an asshat—I don’t care. Take off your knickers.”

“No,” I say, which is hard because my body is already flooding with memories of all the sensations that came the last time I took my panties off in the same room as these two. The heat between my legs grows, I can hardly resist squirming to relieve the tension. Fuck.

Julian drops his messenger bag and walks past Tristan. He stops right in front of me and falls to his knees. I can smell his aftershave. I curl

my fingers around the edge of the piano bench, like it might be able to hold me back.

"Mia," he says, "I'm pretty sure you liked everything that happened the other day. I don't really care about Tristan's blackmail business, but I would like to kiss you again. Very much so."

I look into his warm copper eyes, full of lustful promises. My eyes accidentally dart to his lips and then my own part in unconscious anticipation—after all, I know what it feels like to kiss those lips.

"Is this like a thing you guys do for fun?" I ask, willing to follow any line of thought that might help me avoid the temptation of his lips. "Figure out how to coerce people into threesomes?"

"No," Julian replies, sounding a little shocked, "it really isn't. I mean we've shared a partner before, but it's not a regular thing."

"Oh," I reply, suddenly overtaken by a bizarre feeling of deflation. I don't know why. I have no reason to care whether or not they've had other threesomes. I guess it's just because *I* haven't, I assumed…I guess I'm even more boring than I thought.

Julian leans toward me. His hand lands lightly on my cheek and pushes gently back so his fingers weave into the hair at my temples. It is a wonderful feeling and I have to really fight the instinct to turn my head into his hand the way a common house cat would. I watch his beautiful thick black eyelashes float downward as his eyes leave mine and shift to other parts of my anatomy. His lips are inches from mine—

I stand up. My defiance is declared by the screech of the piano bench pushing backward. Julian reaches up to grab my hips before I can slide out around him.

"Mia," he says quietly, his voice raspy and low. "I want to make you come again and again, until you beg me to stop."

I make the mistake of looking back into his eyes. The way he's looking at me… Behind the playful mischief, there are much deeper and darker things going on, more things I don't have words for.

He reaches under my sweater and digs his fingers under my jeans. Despite what my brain tells them to do, my hands don't reach out to stop him. "Can you honestly tell me that your body doesn't want to feel that as much as mine does?"

No, I think. The throbbing is growing stronger. All he's done is touch my hips and look at me, and already my body is growing antsy and wet with anticipation. Fuck.

"Just you?" I sigh as my brain and body go to war over whether or not to unbutton my jeans.

"If that's what you want," he answers, inching his fingers farther down the edges of my hips.

"Mmhmp," the tiniest of whimpers escapes me. Julian seems to take this as consent because he slips my button free.

I take a deep breath in anticipation, but then his hands abandon me in favor of unzipping his jacket. He takes it off and lays it behind him, then he reaches up, grabs mine from the bench, and he lays it beside his. Next is his sweater, then my scarf, then he's got my jeans around my ankles and is coaxing me down by the hips. My knees land on his jacket, he wraps his arms around my waist and he leans me back into the little nest he's created.

Our lips meet like they've practiced this a hundred times, but the electric jolt that shoots through me reminds me that this is far from familiar territory. His tongue slips into my mouth and slowly traces the edge of my teeth. I lean in deeper and, with one last glance at Tristan, smirking in the corner, I close my eyes and give in.

— Tristan —

I watch Julian wrap his arms around her waist, kissing her like the classical romantic he is. I catch her eyes just before they fall shut and she goes lax against him, and I clench my teeth in anticipation. Fuck. They're still wearing most of their clothes and I'm already halfway to hard. How am I going to make it all the way through them having sex?

Julian's hand slides onto her ass, and mine slides into my pocket to pull out my phone. By the time I've hit record his hand has moved from her ass to her back. Through the phone screen, I watch her fumbling fingers dig into his belt. He stops to help her. When the belt comes off he pulls her arms up, taking her top with it. Her bra is white and simple and somehow, sexier than any of the many intentionally sexy bras I've seen.

She slips her fingers under the elastic of his boxers but she is too shy, or inexperienced, or something, to just dive for the goods. It is torture to watch them take so long, be so tender, like they're lovers. I've never seen Julian this way with anyone else, but strangely I'm not jealous—I'm bizarrely turned on.

Her fingers decide to travel north, unbuttoning his shirt. He pulls one of her bra cups back and bends to take her nipple in his mouth. She lets out a little moan and I can actually see her thighs quiver. I want to stick my face between them.

She pushes his shirt back so his chest is exposed. Julian, mercifully, reaches into his boxers and pulls his own dick out. I want it in my mouth. I want it in my ass. I want my dick in her, anywhere in her. I stay rooted where I am though, teeth clenched, ignoring the ever increasing tightness of my pants.

What did she mean when she asked, "Only you?" It's impossible to tell if she was disappointed or relieved by the answer. It doesn't matter. It certainly is not going to be only him. I've just got to be patient. Unfortunately, patience has never been one of my strengths.

Julian's fingers dip between her legs now. I can tell from the way he twists and arches his wrist that he's slipping them into her pussy. My pants have become painfully constricting.

Her hands reach down and cup his balls. She lifts them like she's testing their weight, then lets them balance as her fingers spread out. Her other hand leaves to tease the base of his cock with light little touches. I know all of Julian's weaknesses. If she—

She does.

She trails up to the head and wraps her palm firmly around it, squeezing. He breaks their kiss with a little gasp, and his whole body shivers. I've never understood why squeezing the head does that to him, but I love using it to my advantage. I wonder how she knows that trick—it doesn't really seem like something a prissy sort of girl should know.

Julian moans and she runs her other hand down his chest and to the floor. She scoots her knees backward, until her torso is parallel to the floor and her tight ass is laid bare in the air, begging to be fucked. I can't help but reach down and grab myself—if I don't my pants are going to rip at the seams.

She lets go of his cock with her hand only to replace her fingers with her tongue, slowly licking her way around until she comes 360. He groans, his hips jerking just a little. She licks her way down until the head is fully in her mouth. Julian slowly lowers himself so his ass is on his heels. He puts his hands on the back of her head, coaxing her down—how he can stand how slow and deliberate she's being I will never know. I would be fucking the back of her throat by now.

I can't believe she tried to insist she didn't want this. Looking at her slowly teasing his dick into her mouth, she's so obviously into this, into him. An unfamiliar little fire goes off inside my belly. Is that jealousy? Am I jealous that she's into him? No, I'm turned on by it. Maybe I'm just jealous because I don't think she'd be that into it if it was me.

I laugh at myself as I remember the way she squirmed and bucked to fuck my tongue. I remember how hard she came, how out of breath she was, how deliriously glazed her eyes were. Of course she'd be into it.

It, my inner asshole whispers. *That just means you know how to make her come, it doesn't mean she'd be so into you that she'd want to make you come.*

Fuck my inner asshole. I reposition the phone and grip my cock tighter.

Mia's neck twists, so I see her throat as she slides his dick all the way down her throat. Her lips reach the base of his cock and his hands slide into her hair. His face is completely relaxed but the muscles of his thighs are stretched taut, his toes curling. My lover, who so rarely allows himself to be lost, is surrendering his ever-present control to her.

A little bit of pre-cum leaks down my head and hits the edge of my fingers. I rub my thumb over the tip of my cock and feel that familiar tingle all the way down my legs, over my kneecaps, into my ankles. It is taking a fuck-ton of self-control to stay where I am.

Mia's only pulling back about halfway up his cock and her speed is increasing. My balls tighten in empathetic response, as if it were me who was about to blow a load down her throat. I wish it was. Or, even better, into her pussy while Julian comes in her mouth.

Shit. I can't even fucking jack off to this without jiggling the camera so much that the video will be useless. What a bizarre form of torture. I wonder if the government has thought of this?

Julian's fist tightens in her hair; his teeth grit. I know that face. He's going to come…But then he jerks her head off his cock and pulls it back so she's looking at him. With serious eyes, he brings his other hand to her face, then sits up to kiss her. It really does look like they're lovers. I didn't even ask him to make it look like they were in a relationship—just them fucking would be enough.

He pulls her in, so they are torso to torso, lips to lips, arms wrapped around each other, his cock nestled between her thighs. They kiss, long, deep, and slow. The way their heads twist in exactly the right timing, matching each other's movements—they really do have chemistry. Fuck.

Now he’s coaxing her backward, so she is lying flat. He crawls on top of her, then backs up so that his head is between her knees. I twist the phone horizontally.

He travels up her thighs quickly. When he reaches her pussy I can’t see what he’s doing, but whatever it is has got her arching her back, clenching her teeth, and squeezing her eyes shut.

He builds her up the same way she built him up, and just like he did, she pulls him up by a handful of hair just before she comes. Julian hasn’t lost his hard-on this whole time, and as he slides up so they are again face-to-face, she pulls her thighs up over his hips. He bends down to kiss her again, rocking his hips in a circular motion until he catches her pussy with the tip of his cock.

He rocks forward, but doesn’t quite get it in. He goes again and again though, slow and circular, patient and calculating. It’s been a while since I’ve watched Julian fuck a woman—well, with the obvious exception of last week, but I was too distracted by my own fury and lust to really notice anything. Now, despite being so turned on I might come just from watching them, I am really *watching* them.

When his dick finally enters her, and I watch his tight ass sink down, watch her legs hook over it, pulling him deeper, I actually groan out loud. The hint of a smirk appears on the corner of Julian’s lips, even as he is kissing her, telling me he heard. That smug ass. God I want to fuck them. Either of them. Both of them.

I visually trace the tendons up Julian’s calves, through his knees, connecting to his thighs as they flex and he pulls up only to plunge back into her. My own knees flood with the desire to thrust. Her mouth opens in a silent gasp and I want to bury my dick in it.

Of all the fucking women I could have found myself accidentally lusting over, it had to be Mia Winters.

Julian pulls out, then plunges again, still slow, still circular. He really has amazing control. Now that their kiss has broken and her head is

arched back on the floor, his eyes are open and watching her. His lips are curved up in self-satisfaction as he revels in what he's making her feel…

And I am stuck here watching him watch her. If I can just hold out a little bit longer…

Julian's thrusts grow shorter but faster. His skin is beginning to go red on his face and neck, and around his hairline it glistens with fresh sweat. His eyes become less focused. She's panting rhythmically but she's not quite there yet. He's going to come before she finishes if he doesn't slow down, but he can't do that without drawing her away from orgasm as well.

All my senses become heightened as I watch their teeth clench, their gasps and moans turn into groans. Mia's hips begin to jerk upward, faster and faster, meeting his thrusts. The way her neck cranes only to roll free, then cranes again and rolls free, the way her teeth are bared—she's so close —

"Aaaaggggghhhhh," Julian lets out a long shocked moan. He slows down, captured in the initial moment of release. I can tell from the way he opens his eyes and looks at her—shocked, apologetic, guilty for being so satiated—that he had been trying to hold back but his body took over.

She responds with a frustrated groan, her hips still bucked up into his. My groin pulses, psychosomatically experiencing the sensation of her pussy clenching it the way it must be clenching his.

She closes her eyes and pulls him into another kiss. He pulls out of her and thrusts in again, but it's been just long enough that she's no longer at the peak she was at before. His legs quiver with the exhaustion of exertion and satisfaction. Julian is a good lover, he will try to bring her back there, but I've got a better idea.

I press the stop-record button and put my phone down. Finally, I unbutton my pants and push them down along with my boxers. My cock happily springs free, and like a beacon, it leads me to what it wants.

I grab Julian by the hips and pull him out of her. They both open their eyes and look at me in surprise, but Julian instantly cooperates. He turns around, swipes his tongue across my lips, teasing me with the taste of her, and then gets out of the way.

Mia hoists herself up onto her elbows just as I plant my hands on either side of her hips. She glares at me and her lips part, obviously she is about to protest—such a broken record—but then her eyes shift down, between our bodies, and I know where they land. It's delightful to see the little micro curls and twitches of her lips as she wages an internal war between what her mind's got to say about our long history of hating each other and what her body has got to say about desperately wanting the orgasm it almost had.

I shift my weight to my left arm and reach under her thigh with my right, yanking her down. This is no time for thinking. The tip of my dick is at her clit. I roll my hips in circles just like I watched Julian do. Her back arches instinctually, but she willfully pulls it back down. Even though she seems resistant, she isn't actually trying to get away from me, so I'm taking that as consent.

Her eyes open and meet mine for a second, fierce, defiant, and utterly filled with hungry lust. I push into her just a little bit. When she looks away, biting her bottom lip again, I know that we're engaged in a contest of wills. But we are both so spun up, she's just wasting time with these little rebellions.

She cranes her head back, twisting at the hips, but my hand around her thigh holds her pussy in place. I pull back a touch and let my dick drop so it's now putting pressure on her entrance rather than just her happy nub. She's slick with her own arousal. It would be so easy to slide right into her. But I resist. I should get an award for self-control; I really am impressive.

I keep going, pushing forward just the tiniest bit and then pulling back just enough to keep her stimulated, make her want it. I want to fuck her so bad, but I want her to be the one that makes it happen. I want the satisfaction of knowing she couldn't resist my cock.

I bend my head down and, even though it's a bit of an awkward angle, I capture her pert, aroused nipple between my lips and suck hard on it. She gasps, all shocked and throaty. In response, a fresh jolt of adrenaline shoots through me straight into my dick. I redirect the energy to my mouth and suck harder.

I want to bruise her nipple. I want to mark it. I want to leave her with something she'll see for weeks. I want her to not be able to forget.

Her hips buck up as I suck, but not enough to force me inside of her. She arches her back again, pressing her stomach into my chest, melding the ridges between our bones and muscles together like puzzle pieces. All my instincts tell me to fuck the mind games and just fuck her sweet little pussy instead. God damn it.

I can't even press into her now to tease her, I can't handle it. I suck on her nipple like it's a life line because focusing on it is my only tool of resistance. Her hands land on my shoulders. Her fingers slide up them, spreading, then easing around to the back of my neck. They lace through my hair.

"Fuck!" I gasp as she yanks my head up by a fistful of hair. My lips twist into a snarl but her pelvis rotates against mine, luring my body into automatic response. Her thighs slide up against my hips. Now I'm the one thrusting before I can think to stop myself.

Her eyes bore directly into mine, and her lips quirk up in the satisfaction of victory, but right now I don't care if I lost the battle of wills because with that one thrust my dick is finally inside her. She is hot and wet and, even though Julian has already worked her up, still tight enough to make my cock feel squeezed.

"Aahhh fuck," I groan. She lets go of my hair, and her arms wrap around my shoulders, pulling us closer together, pulling me deeper into her. I want to pull out and plunge back into her hard—and she's so aroused I probably could—but I also want to regain control of the situation.

Braced on my knees, I swivel my hips around, rimming the entrance of her pussy with the base of my cock. I remember how crazy it made her when I did it with my tongue. Sure enough, with only a few rotations I feel her fingers curl and claw at the shirt on my back. I swear I can feel her vag pulsing, squeezing my cock. I push in deeper and clench my teeth to keep myself from moaning.

She feels so good. It's been months since I've had sex with a woman, but I don't think that's the only reason I'm so spun right now.

Her hips rock against mine. I slide my hand up her thigh and grab as much of her pert ass-cheek as I can, pulling her closer and closer. Her muscles clench around my cock, and I let my head fall onto the nape of her neck so she can't see the look on my face as I concentrate on not coming.

The best way to make a woman come is not to plunge into her, but to grind into her. I thrust up and around, up and around, up and around. I have to focus on setting this rhythm because she's so hot and tight, and the way she rocks back up into me is so tantalizing that if I don't, I'm going to come before she does.

Her legs squeeze tighter around me, I can feel the heaving of her chest growing quicker as her breaths grow shorter. I drive my cock harder into her, pulling out a little more and a little more with each thrust. Her pants turn into guttural squeaks. I pull my head up from her neck and look at her face.

Her eyes are closed. Her lower lip is sucked between her teeth, and she's biting it hard enough that I wouldn't be surprised to see blood. Her eyebrows are twisted down and up, her face pulled back into an expression that could mean either pain or pleasure. That is exactly the look I want to see.

I slide in and out of her. The squeeze of her stretched pussy against the base of my cock begs me to fuck her harder. I resist, but the more I pull out the harder she thrusts up into me.

“Aahhh,” she moans. Her arms wrap around my shoulders so tight that next time she thrusts she practically lifts herself off the floor. I slam my dick into her, and her hips buck up to catch me. Her legs around me squeeze tight, not letting me pull out much. She bucks again and again, more spastic each time.

She’s going to come. There’s no way she won’t come. I push her back down though, and despite the resistance of her legs, I manage to pull out a few inches so that I can push back into her, deeper. All of my instincts tell me to pull out again, but she’s so close and I want to see the look on her face when I make her come.

So I stay buried inside of her, rotating my pelvis as fast as I possibly can, thrusting and thrusting until she’s flat against the ground.

“Fuck,” she pants, “fuck, fuck, fuck, please…”

I groan, but it quickly turns into a growl—an actual growl. I dip my face back into her neck and bite.

“Aaaahhh!” she gasps as my teeth latch onto her clavicle. Every little noise she makes somehow turns me on even more. Damn.

She bucks up, up, up, practically vibrating. I thrust and grind and push, deeper and deeper and deeper. It’s so fucking hard not to come.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she groans. “Yes, yes, please, please…”

I let go of her clavicle and move my lips up. With my teeth on her earlobe I whisper, “Please what?”

I don’t have to look at her face to know that familiar little twist of defiance is surely on her lips. I stop thrusting and slow my grinding. Her body immediately reacts, her hips jump up, her hands land on my ass pulling me in. She must be really fucking close. I give her one teasing little thrust, and then slow down even more.

“Fuck—” she groans in frustration. I am grinning from ear to ear, my teeth still on her earlobe.

“Please what?” I repeat.

“Please—” she pants, thrusting again, her hands squeezing my ass cheeks, pulling at the skin.

I pull away and plunge back in, but then go still again. “God! Fuck!” she snarls. Her head swings up and her eyes open, flashing defiantly at me.

“Say it,” I whisper, grinding in with one long slow rotation. Not only has this little pause helped me not come prematurely, but making her beg for it has somehow got my cock even harder. I want to plow into her so fucking bad—but not till she says it.

Defiant silence. One more slow rotation. “Say it,” I whisper again.

“Please,” she repeats, her hands not letting up on my ass.

“Please what?” I growl.

“Please make me come,” she finally sighs in defeat. Not exactly what I was thinking, but it turns out I like it even better. I thrust and grind and grind and grind, bringing her back to the breaking point. Her thighs squeeze my hips tighter. Her pants grow shorter and louder. “Yes, yes, yes, yes,” she whispers in abandon.

Her hips buck and buck, she’s fucking me as hard as I am fucking her. The pressure of her vag, squeezing, clenching, working up to orgasm, takes over my senses. I can feel the pressure building in my balls, I can feel the—

“FUCK!” she practically screams. Her clenching fingers turn into scratching nails, running down my back. I put all of my strength into the deepest thrust I can manage. Then one more. Her body becomes putty melting in my hands, but for the rhythmic clenching of her pussy around me. She came, and now her body is trying to suck up all my come.

Happy to oblige, I plunge into her one more time. My balls constrict hard. I bury my face in her hair, my eyes squeeze shut, my teeth clench, a deep groan of ultimate satisfaction rumbles out of me and I feel a burst of intense pleasure, of release, of relief, of exhaustion as my seed pours into her.

"Fuck," I whisper. As I collapse, I push even deeper into her, although I wouldn't have thought it possible. Her pussy keeps milking my cock. I want to fall asleep on top of her, her arms and legs wrapped around me, my cock inside her; I want to have the nameless smell of her hair gradually take over my senses. "Fuck," I repeat.

"Fuck." She echoes me in a tone that tells me she feels the same way. Her hips swivel just a little bit. Her body still wants even more. Who would have thought know-it-all prissy little Mia Winters would have such a libido?

I squeeze my ass cheeks together in response, perfectly happy to let her grind her way into another orgasm. But instead of the upward thrust I'm expecting, her legs go loose around me, and she actually pulls away.

I get back up onto my elbows. Our eyes catch. For a second I see vulnerability and fear and traces of the satiated well-fucked animal her higher-order logics are already suppressing. Then she looks away. Seeing all of this suddenly makes my higher-order logics turn on too.

I pull out of her and get onto my knees. The truth is, right now I've got a lot of chemicals in my brain telling me I'm much more fond of her than I actually am. This is causing conflict, and I don't know how to process that conflict. I don't know what to say. Part of me is already taking into account that I want to fuck her again, so I probably shouldn't say anything that will make that harder than it's already going to be. Another part of me is already arguing with that horny part. Again, albeit it very differently this time. *Fuck.*

She shimmies out from under me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Julian move. I hadn't forgotten he was there, but I also hadn't been giving any thought to what he might be doing. Judging by the way he's got one

hand moving away from my phone, and the other bringing it back down to the chair I left it on, I'd say—

"Did you just video that too?" Mia asks, her tone impossible to interpret.

"Yeah," Julian answers with a cheeky grin, "only for my own viewing pleasure though."

She lets out a groan filled with a very different kind of fatigue and a very different kind of frustration. She stands up, and I do the same. We both collect our clothes in silence. I try to think of something clever to say, but most of my brain is just insisting on taking a catnap, and, if not that, then sticking my dick back into her and banging her until I come again—and then, of course, taking a nap.

However, she's got her jeans back on before I've even found my underwear. As I pull them around my hips I realize they're Julian's, but I don't particularly care; we can switch back later. Mia throws her sweater on without either her bra or T-shirt. She grabs those, stuffs them into her open backpack, and is zipping up her parka in less than a minute.

It occurs to me that I could grab her shoes to keep her from running off, which is obviously what she's about to do. But my brain still isn't working, and some terrible feeling is now pumping through my veins. I don't know what it is but it makes me feel like curling up in a dark cocoon of blankets.

Then she's out the door without a word to either of us. My eyes find Julian's. He's got an amused little smirk on his face. Lucky him—being so unaffected. I wish I knew why I was—actually, no, I don't. I just wish I wasn't affected at all. Maybe if I ignore it, it will go away.

In a room that feels empty, we get dressed. I can feel Julian's eyes on me, but he knows me well enough not to comment on my silence. As I button up my peacoat he magically says the only word I want to hear:

"Dinner?"

“The French Kitchen,” I reply, adjusting my scarf.

He opens the door, we walk through, and that is that.

—

On Wednesday I have absolutely no reason to see Mia Winters, and I don’t. On Thursday I don’t even look at her during either of the two lectures we have together, but I swear I can smell her cunt from all the way across the room. On Friday I knock on her door with the clever plan to ask if I can borrow notes for a class I missed. Her roommate answers and tells me that Mia is out. I get away as quickly as possible, dumbstruck by my own stupidity. That feeling fades and on Saturday I wander by a lame coffee shop I once saw her in.

I’m there for forty minutes—reading Frankfurt for Normative Ethics, of course—before Mia shows up. She is with her roommate, whose name is something that starts with an L. Before they see me, I quickly negotiate with a bum at the table next to me for the giant newspaper he’s reading. I give him fifty bucks for it, and then I actually spend thirty minutes hiding behind it so I can eavesdrop on Mia and her friend.

I don’t detect the slightest hint that either of our escapades has been discussed with her friend. I know that technically complete secrecy is exactly what I demanded…but it’s still insulting that she could actually manage to not talk about it.

When they leave with their apple ciders—who goes to a coffee shop and gets apple cider?—I go order myself a coffee to go. *What is wrong with me?* I ask myself while I wait. *There are plenty of other women besides Mia Winters. Probably plenty who would be down for a three-way, and I’m sure most of them are not prissy know-it-all good-girl types with an unnatural ability to get under my skin. So why the hell did I just spend a Saturday following Mia Winters around?*

My name is called and I retrieve my coffee, feeling rather sour. I’m certainly not going to waste any more time stalking her. It’s very unbecoming. In fact, it’s downright inappropriate for a Masters to be doing

anything other than taking what he wants. *Ah,* I sarcastically retort, *hello, Father. Lovely to hear from you today.*

I step out of the coffee shop and have only gone one foot around the corner when I ram into some imbecile just standing there. My coffee splashes backward, sloshing down my white cashmere scarf and spattering my face.

"What is wrong with—" I begin. Then I actually look at who I'm about to yell at. As our eyes meet I think, *Of course.*

Mia catches her balance against the wall, straightens herself up and plants her hands on her bossy hips. "Why are you following me around?" she demands, glaring at me.

"I was here first," I point out.

"I come here almost every day, I have seen you in here maybe once. This is not a coincidence. So what do you want?"

Her hair is in a disheveled ponytail, her coat is too tight across the pert boobs my mind so easily recalls sucking on. A jolt of adrenaline or testosterone or both shots through me. It wants me to pick her up by the thighs and shove her into the wall beside us. That primal instinct is regrettably blocked by the reason and customs of the modern world though, so instead the energy meant to fuel it transforms into aggression.

"Fine," I growl, surprising myself, "I can't stop thinking about fucking you. I don't want to want to fuck you. You're not my type. I don't want entanglements and I don't want to keep thinking about you, but I am. I want to fuck you again and again and again until I don't want to anymore and I don't want to hear your prissy spew about how you're not that kind of girl—I know you're not. The entire fucking Philosophy Department and everyone in Berkeley knows you're not *that kind of girl*. But you are, despite your reticence, somehow, a really fucking good lay and I'm pretty sure you feel the same way about me and"—I drop my voice to a whispered hiss— "Julian. So save us all some time and just say yes."

She blinks incredulously at me and takes a deep breath that pushes her boobs up even more. “Say yes to what?” she asks, and I realize she actually doesn’t know what I’m asking.

“To fucking us again,” I exhale, absolutely shocked anyone could be so daft.

She blinks at me several times. I have no idea what the look on her face means and I don’t like not knowing what looks mean. Then, finally, her plump little lips move, and the word that comes out is, “No.”

“What?” I blurt, utterly shocked. “What do you mean, *no*? You want to fuck us. You know you do.”

“No,” she repeats. “I might have physically enjoyed it, but that doesn’t mean that I want to, to…I don’t even know what you call something like this. But no.”

“I don’t believe you,” I insist, absolutely infuriated with her. I actually told her the truth, I confessed to wanting her again, I showed her weakness, and she’s just—she’s just saying *no*?

I place my foot between her legs and twist toward the wall, so she has no choice but to step back against it if she wants to avoid touching me. She does exactly that, but now she’s between me and the wall and I am perfectly fine taking advantage of it. I take another step toward her, pinning my right arm on the wall, inches from her face.

Her eyes widen in alarm, but her mouth remains set in a stubborn line. I want to devour it. I want to claim it as mine to devour whenever I want. I want to unbutton my pants and fuck her up against this wall. I lean toward her—

“Hey! Mia—” Her head whips around and mine is quick to follow. I rein in the snarling urge to lash out at her friend for interrupting us.

The friend stands, staring, carrying a pharmacy bag that she didn’t have when they left the coffee shop. Her eyes fix on the space between us,

obviously judging the distance to be too narrow. I can practically hear the questions and accusations jumping around in her brain.

Before either of them gets the chance to speak, I pull away and fling my destroyed scarf at Mia. “Next time watch where you’re going!” I snarl, then stomp up the street, away from her and her friend.

“So was your phone still there?” her friend asks.

Two more steps and I’m out of hearing range, so I don’t know what Mia says, but I can feel both of their eyes on my retreating back. Doesn’t matter though—in twenty more feet I’ll be around the corner.

I toss my full coffee into the first trashcan-like object I see—might be for recyclables, might be a homeless guy’s cart, might be a public ashtray, I don’t care—then I pull my arms into my sleeves, glad I wore a loose jacket today. From there I shimmy them into my pants. My cock is hard just from looking at her defiant lips, just from briefly imagining fucking her against the wall. I try to rearrange it, but the only comfortable position I find is letting my dick stick out of the top of my pants. Luckily my coat is long enough to hide it.

Two blocks later my boner still isn’t gone, so instead of heading back to my dorm I head to Julian’s apartment. That fucker will still be with his grad group, but I don’t care. I’ve got to bust a nut somehow, and if it’s not going to be in Julian’s ass then it might as well be all over his sheets.

—

Monday, I have no reason to see Mia and I don’t. Tuesday, I look at her in class, but if she ever looks back at me, I miss it. Wednesday, I actually ask Julian if she went to discussion today.

He tells me she did and they both conducted themselves very professionally. I sort of want to smack him for the taunting smirk with which he says it, but instead I kiss him and fuck him inside the handicap stall of the men’s room. Not long after that, I decide I should check in with

the Yale Undergraduate Philosophical Society at tonight's seven o'clock meeting.

I arrive at 6:56 to discover that there are already half a dozen people there, including Mia and her suspicious-eyed friend, L-something. Although there are several open chairs I slip into the one next to her and pretend the significant dip in conversation has nothing to do with my presence. I've been to these meetings before, once or twice, during freshmen year…

"So, as an irregular attender, someone update me on tonight's topic," I casually demand of no one in particular. My well-practiced mix of authoritative and uninterested always does wonders in these situations, and in no time at all, some Jewish kid I had a class with last year pipes up.

"We're discussing MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. If you haven't read it then you're unlikely—"

The door opens and Theo walks in. I had forgotten he was a part of this club. How sloppy of me. It's actually convenient though. I can let him think I'm here to impress him, which should only aid my ambitions.

"I'm sure I'll catch on," I say to the Jewish kid.

"Masters," Theo chuckles, "fancy seeing you here." He sits down beside me. "Nice to have someone to shake things up."

"It's now seven o'clock," David Lin, the uptight president, snippily interrupts, "so let's turn to the official topic of tonight's Y.U.P.S. meeting, *After Virtue*. Now, to begin with, let's agree not to dally in the realm of metaethics beyond MacIntyre's focus."

A mousy-faced, red-haired girl makes a little squeaking sound, like she might have objected but thought better of it. I don't recognize her, which means she's either not in the department or she's a freshman. Nothing about her is interesting enough for me to care either way.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Mia diligently flip through her copy of the book. I can tell by how rigid her back is that my presence is

bothering her.

“Mind if I read over your shoulder?” I ask, just loud enough for everyone else to hear, but quietly enough that it will seem like I didn’t mean for them to. Her teeth grit; she knows exactly what I’m doing. An especially wicked trickle of thrill runs through me. I like that I’m affecting her so much.

“Now, now, Dave,” Theo interrupts, easily taking over the room, “that’s really putting the cart before the horse, don’t you think?”

Although David’s lips pucker sourly, he’s smart enough not to stand up to Theo—you don’t have to be a member of the Brotherhood to know that Theo is a VIP on campus.

“I mean,” Theo continues, “to jump right into it, Nietzsche’s assertions depend so thoroughly on a definition of the Will that such a definition must be discussed. We must examine the word ‘lineage’—”

“That’s irrelevant,” Mia interrupts, surprising me, and, judging by the glances going around the table, everyone else. However, she doesn’t seem to notice or care. She looks right at Theo, her voice neutral, rational, almost robotic, like she’s looking at a mathematical equation floating in front of her and simply reading it. “Nietzsche’s statements are not direct refutations of Aristotle’s, nor are they in opposition. MacIntyre doesn’t address it. Maybe he didn’t see it—”

Another wave of exchanged glances, some amused and curious, but most are offended and appalled—it takes a lot of nerve to say something like that about a well-respected author like Alasdair MacIntyre. Her friend is looking at her like they’ve already had this conversation twelve times but she still can’t believe Mia is making such claims in front of the Y.U.P.S. I sort of wish I had read the book so I knew exactly what they were talking about.

“—but his entire premise, that these two philosophers are even proposing incompatible ethical theories, hinges on what Nietzsche believed the *source* of the Will to be, not its definition.” With this she looks

pointedly at Theo. “Nietzsche believes the Will is irrational because man cannot cite an empirical origin of the Will. Aristotle can. Virtue ethics clearly believes the Will to be rational. Therefore, MacIntyre’s question is really about whether or not the Will is rational—if it is, then, according to MacIntyre, the virtue ethicists have the final say on morality. If it is not, then Nietzsche does.”

“Your point supposes that the Will does indeed exist,” Theo rebuts, his eyes sharp with forced neutrality.

I wonder what he’s really thinking. He’s giving away little micro-indicators that he’s bothered by what she’s said, or maybe just that she interrupted him.

“*The Will* is an English phrase that exists to symbolically describe an intangible, universal phenomenon of how man experiences himself,” Mia argues. “It does exist, even if only because we experience it as existing. The problem is communicating exactly what we mean by it.”

“Precisely.” Theo smiles condescendingly. “You’ve made my point for me. So—”

“No, your point was that Nietzsche misinterpreting Aristotle related to his use of the phrase *the Will*. Mine is that Nietzsche himself didn’t understand virtue ethics, was instead making his entire argument in rebellion against the rule-based ethics that he inherited from Enlightenment-era ethicists like Kant and Hume, and that in actuality the majority of his philosophical works suggest he actually was in alignment with the thinking of Aristotle and other virtue ethicists, but his inability to conceive of intangible aspects of the human experience as having a logic system, and thus being rational, is what caused him, and MacIntyre, to fail in seeing the similarity.”

“You can’t really think that MacIntyre would fail to see such an obvious flaw if there was one?” David asks, aghast.

“He must have, because he didn’t address it anywhere in the book,” Mia matter-of-factly replies.

David visibly flusters and flat-out ignores what she's said. "Your entire argument hinges upon the existence of the Will, just like Theo was saying."

"Do you really want to debate whether or not the Will exists?" Mia sighs. "We will spend the entire meeting on that, argue into oblivion, come to no agreed conclusion, and it will all be pointless because, no matter what we in the proverbial ivory tower might like to argue, the Will exists as a fundamental construct of the experience of Self across human cultures."

"Actually," the mousy redhead squeaks, looking as shocked that she's talking as everyone else does, "there are several tribal cultures that don't have any words that express the concept of Self. So—so—so," she rushes, staring at her lap, "so, they technically can't experience the Will, even if it exists, as a construct of Self, only as a construct of group."

"Oh God," groans the Jewish kid, "who let the Anthro Department in?" He looks around for support—clearly he thinks he's been funny. He gets a few nods, but not from anyone who matters.

The girl blushes in response and somehow manages to curl her neck even farther in. Who knew these meetings could be so vicious? To an outsider, this would seem perfectly polite and civilized, but as someone who's been soaking in the culture of the Philosophy Department for three years, it's obvious a battle is brewing. How fun.

"That's a good point," Mia says to the girl, smiling supportively at her. Then she turns to the Jewish kid and says, "The humanities all inform upon each other. Don't bash Anthro. You're only making yourself look bad."

A tiny snigger escapes from Chase Locke, causing Theo to scowl. I just came here to bother Mia, but look at all the interesting data I'm gathering. Really, a good choice on my part.

"Anyway," Mia says, "even if the Will is experienced as the Will of the group, the Will of the group is still being experienced, and acted upon, by the individual. Thus, the individual does experience the Will."

I wish I'd sat across from her instead of next to her so that I could read her face better. She has clearly taken an unpopular position, but she's handling it with grace and guts. She isn't the least bit flustered. She answers every objection without showing any sign that she's taking a lick of it personally. She's like a Vulcan. Up until this moment, I never could have imagined that would be a turn-on for me—but, it turns out, it is.

"How can acting upon the Will of the group ever be seen as ethical by a virtuist? You've taken us away from both Aristotle and Nietzsche," Theo dismisses, giving her another condescending smile. "The real matter at hand is, is the Will rational? And, if so, is MacIntyre right, that only virtue ethics can thereafter be logically permissible?"

I can tell by the little quirk at the edge of Mia's eyebrow that she is not only unimpressed by him, but probably thinking the same thing I am—he simply didn't understand her point. Which is too bad, because she is making a good point. Why is she about to let it go?

"Hold on a second," I drawl, excited to poke the fire before they let it go out. "I think Winters has a point. How can we even talk about whether or not the Will is rational without determining the source of the will?"

Glances, glances, glances. David Lin is looking at Theo for an indicator of how he's interpreting my question—good David, respecting the actual hierarchy. Theo's eyes slide from me to Mia and back. It is very quick, but I can see him doing the math. It might work in my favor for him to assume I'm here just to get into her pants. That way I can disagree with him all I want but he'll think it's for pussy and therefore be unlikely to take it personally or count it against me. I suppose that, primarily, it is for pussy, but I do actually think this is a question of interest.

"How do we determine the source of the Will?" pipes up the Jewish kid. Sophomore. Clearly he doesn't understand the democratic setup of this whole thing is just a facade.

"We only can if we adhere to Nietzsche's definition," Theo answers. "Does anyone think differently?"

“I think that’s going too far,” I reply. “I think we’re stuck on the Korzybski issue. Do we really understand exactly what MacIntyre, or Nietzsche or Aristotle for that matter, intended to convey? Or are we interpreting their words incorrectly? I personally can think of many different ways I would define what I experience as Will, and they all have a different source.”

Theo gives me a knowing smirk. I suppose what I just said could sound like a thinking-with-my-dick statement. “Speaking of Korzybski,” he smoothly says, “please explain exactly how you’re interpreting Mia’s choice of words first. If we don’t start working the linguistics backward now, who knows how far down the rabbit hole of initial misunderstanding we might go.”

“Winters is pointing out that the source of the Will is the pin upon which MacIntyre’s entire premise hangs. If the source of the Will can be determined rational, then according to MacIntyre, virtue ethics is the only rational morality; if it is determined irrational, Nietzsche was right all the long. You know though, I think that sort of ‘either/or’ thinking is, not only very limiting, but is itself a logical flaw.”

People perk up, ready to bristle. Mia has actually turned her body toward me. Even with just the quickest of glances, I can tell she’s surprised by me. Perhaps I’m impressing her. How delightful. This really is fun. I think I’m going to come next week too. And now, to really send them into a frenzy:

“Maybe the religious philosophers are correct,” I muse, “and morality exists independent of humanity. If that’s the case, then definitions of the Will or debates about its source are irrelevant to the argument of morality.”

“You’re just crossing into the classic Phaedo conundrum,” Mia’s friend pipes up.

“Quite right, Leanne,” Theo adds. “Which, is useless given our goal is purely to discuss the argument MacIntyre makes.”

“What’s the point in discussing it if it’s so obviously logically flawed?” I retort.

I can tell by the way David’s face flushes that I’ve just offended his sensibilities deeply, but he bites his tongue. As if to add frosting to my cake, Chase responds with the least scholarly reasoning possible:

“Shiffrin is teaching a class on it next year.” Chase shrugs. “Might be practical to get all the dumb arguments worked out before everyone takes it.”

David clears his throat. “We need to get back on topic. Is—”

“We are on topic,” both Mia and I say at exactly the same time. My eyes slide and for the first time actually meet hers. She looks away fast, and I swear—I swear—I see her cheeks go just a little red.

I want to bang her on this table. I’ll have to talk to Julian and start making plans for next Wednesday. Finding ways to screw Mia Winters is, apparently, becoming my new hobby.

“We are not on topic,” David insists. “The topic is specifically examining the argument that MacIntyre makes. He does not discuss the Phaedo conundrum. He makes his views on any arguments that relate morality to the possibility of a god or gods clear. He is specifically—”

“He is specifically limiting his argument to Nietzsche versus Aristotle. Yes.” Mia sighs. “However, he does so because he believes he has logically refuted all other theories, but his logic system is clearly virtue ethicist. If you step outside of that logic system, then the refutations upon which his ‘one or the other’ argument depends become invalid and, therefore, he’s not really presenting a solid argument. His argument depends upon the reader agreeing with his logic system. So, although this was not my original point, and yes, it is not in the direction you want us to go, it is pointless to discuss MacIntyre’s argument without acknowledging the flaws in his premise.”

“Not to be too on the nose,” I add, “but technically all communication depends upon the preset boundary condition of a shared logic system.”

David actually groans. “Devolving into philosophy of language is __”

“Oh stop being so stuffy, Dave,” Theo cuts in. “This is the nature of debate. Nothing is ever really irrelevant. If you can’t see how something connects then you should ask yourself why, rather than insisting the rest of us, who see the connection, are wrong.”

— Mia —

I know where this is going—the same place all discussions in Y.U.P.S. go: In circles. This is the nature of doing philosophy out loud instead of on paper. Considering half the people in this room, including Leanne and David, are majoring in philosophy because they plan on continuing to law school, circular arguing is probably very useful for them. I, however, am a philosophy major because I can’t help but ask these questions and then overthink them. I’d actually like to get somewhere in these discussions, but everyone is always on a slightly different page, or driven by different motives, and so we never do.

I turn my attention back to my notebook and allow my hand to doodle around the edge. Circles turn into eyes, which turn into faces, which accidentally look too much like the boy sitting next to me. I quickly scribble curls and shade them dark to cover for my subconscious slip, but then I start to see Julian in them, which is almost as bad. Maybe if I just make the hair a lot longer and add boobs—who cares if it looks like I’m drawing a transvestite? All I care about is that I don’t accidentally give Tristan reason to think I’m thinking about him.

I know he came tonight just to get under my skin, and it sucks that he’s actually made several intelligent points. It’s not that I don’t know he’s smart, at least academically. It’s just that I’m usually not reminded of it. I’m

usually not sitting next to him, smelling his deodorant—or aftershave or whatever it is that is tugging at my senses and tempting me to lean closer so I can get more of it—while he's being smart. It's just that I haven't been forced to remember that he's smart since before I knew what he looked and felt like naked.

Out of the corner of my eye I see flicking. I glance just far enough to see that he's twirling a pen between his fingers. I pull my hand to the other end of my paper and try to write something that is relevant to what is being talked about, but I've already lost track of the conversation.

Leanne, Chase, and the sophomore, Jacob, are now dominating it. The freshman—Becca, I think—looks like she's trying really hard to follow everything that is happening, and I feel bad for her. David looks disgruntled. Theo looks amused. And I refuse to look at Tristan.

His hand continues to invade my peripheral vision, and then it actually crosses onto my paper. I nearly snatch my notebook away but his pen is poised to write, and I hesitate just long enough to become curious about what he's going to write. Probably something dumb.

I watch his hand trail, slowly revealing unexpectedly tidy scribbles:

You haven't given me an answer.

What does that mean?

I scrawl back, keeping one eye on the table, not wanting anyone—especially Leanne—to notice that we're both writing in my notebook.

When are we going to fuc

As soon as I realize what he's about to write I knock his hand away. I don't look at his face, but I swear I can *hear* him smirk.

I did answer you. Never.

You lied.

No, you just didn’t like my answer.

You want us.

I roll my eyes but otherwise do not respond. There is no point in continuing this. I turn my attention back to the table. “Using Nietzsche’s phrase in the context of Aristotle’s work confuses what each philosopher actually meant,” Leanne is saying.

“It’s the ideas that need to be focused on, not the words,” Theo replies, “words are just—”

Tristan’s calf brushes against mine. He actually hooks his foot around my ankle and pulls my leg toward him. He leans back casually and a second later his hand slips up my thigh. I detangle our legs and try to discreetly push his hand away. For someone who wanted so much secrecy, he sure is being risky—of course, I suppose he only wanted his gay activities to be a secret. Maybe straight stuff is perfectly hunky-dory.

His hand slips right back up, this time starting lower. His fingers instantly find a spot that makes me shudder. How he could possibly have such precision and effect— even at an awkward angle, even through my jeans—is absolutely baffling…and terrible. Even as I’m already digging my nails into the top of his hand, trying to pinch him away, my whole lower body comes alive. I pinch him harder, desperate to get rid of his hand before I don’t want to anymore.

He pulls back, catching his injured hand and rubbing it. I can’t help but glance at it. I’m quite pleased to see red little crescent moons swelling

to life.

He knocks his ankle into mine again. I move away again. But his legs are longer, and it seems that no matter how I move my legs, he finds a way to snake around them again. This is ridiculous.

Then, abruptly he stops. He takes his ankle back and leans forward, his hands folded for his chin to rest on, looking all kinds of innocent. Only when chairs start scraping do I realize why.

"We will officially end this meeting of the Yale Undergraduate Philosophical Society," David formally announces. "Thank you all for attending."

On my other side, Leanne is leaning away, stuffing her copy of *After Virtue* into her backpack. How could a whole hour pass while I just zoned out…I was distracted, but still, a whole hour?

I glance at Tristan out of the corner of my eye. I still feel tingles in my legs and heat in my underwear, which is growing moist. Fuck. He's right. I do want them. I just don't want to want them.

I'm about to close my notebook and pack up like everyone else, but then…I don't know what possesses me to do it. I slide my pen to the line right under where Tristan last wrote, and, because I'm apparently a little bit insane, write:

I'll think about it.

—

With the meeting ended, everyone breaks into little side conversations, standing up at different speeds, filtering out slowly or leaving quickly. I pretend to be utterly engaged in whatever Leanne is saying to Jacob Bernstein, but really I'm thinking about my little notebook conversation with Tristan.

What possessed me to write *I'll think about it*? Was it because Tristan demonstrated that, at least academically, he's not a complete idiot? Or that just remembering the feeling of his hands sliding up and down my body makes me wet? Both, probably.

I'm such an idiot. And now, I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know what he thinks is going to happen. Pretending to be engrossed in Leanne's conversation is the safest option.

To my great relief, Tristan leaves his seat and walks around the table to Theo, Chase, and David. Several words about how Tristan should come to the next meeting are exchanged, and then mentions of the upcoming intramural hockey game between Calhoun and Pierson can be heard.

Leanne and Jacob push their chairs in so I do the same and follow them as they slowly make their way toward the door. I hope Leanne is not going to invite him to dinner with us. If she does, then I'm inviting Becca, who Jacob so rudely tried to make fun of for bringing up some Anthro data. I try to be sympathetic, reminding myself that he's just a sophomore and he's trying to impress jackasses like Theo and Chase so he feels like he really belongs in Y.U.P.S.

Tristan, Theo, and Chase are moving toward the door faster than us. As Tristan walks past me, his knuckles brush against my hip, too hard to be accidental, but too discreetly to be noticed by anyone but me. I watch him go, shaking my head, as if to tell myself no. Unfortunately, I'm probably not going to be any better at listening to myself than I was last time.

I jerk my head back to Leanne, who is watching me, her lips pursed and her eyebrow arched knowingly.

"So, sushi?" I say, pretending not to notice.

"Yeah, text and see if Azzi wants to come.."

I'm only halfway through the text when Leanne, with a tone that is buoyant and distracted—the kind of tone that would make you think she

was asking about nothing of real interest or consequence if you didn't know her—asks, "So, what's going on with you and Tristan Masters?"

This is the tone she uses whenever she is fishing for what she thinks is very juicy information. I have been on the receiving end of this tone before. I have strategies in place for it.

"What do you mean?" I reply, doing my very best to sound casually confused, as if her question has absolutely no basis in the boundary conditions of my reality.

"I mean, why did he come sit down next to you and then flirt with you for the entire meeting and why were you writing little notes to each other?"

"I was not—"

"Dude." She grins. "I'm not blind."

"There is nothing going on that hasn't been since the day we met—he tries to annoy the shit out of me and occasionally I sink so low as to rise to his bait. He was just writing stupid stuff in my notebook and I was dumb enough to reply."

"Oh yeah?" Her eyes narrow slyly. "So if I read your notebook—" She snatches for it. Her laugh is playful but she actually manages to yank it out of my hands. I reach to grab it back but I'm so forceful that it crashes onto the floor and several loose papers shoot out in every direction.

"Damn it," I mutter, automatically bending down to pick them up.

Leanne starts picking up papers too and offers an apologetic smile, which gives me hope, for half a second, that she will drop her inquiry. But alas… "So now I know there's definitely something worth reading in there and I live with you. You have to sleep sometime."

"Leanne…" I sigh, but then I am saved.

“Ladies,” Theo interrupts, strolling up to us. Chase Locke, right behind him, bends down to pick up a few papers that I hadn’t gotten to yet. He hands them to me with a smile that is too intentionally charming.

“We were just wondering if you’d like to join us at the Box, where we plan to continue tonight’s titillating discussion.”

I want to gag. I’ve always been on perfectly polite terms with Theo over the few years we’ve been acquainted. The Philosophy Department is, after all, small enough that you inevitably meet everyone in your major, and nearly everyone, more or less, follows standard professional schmoozing protocol—certain beautiful, spoiled, annoying, blond-haired individuals being the exception—but I’ve never really liked Theo.

However, the second he asks, Leanne’s eyes light up and I can tell that, at least for now, she has completely forgotten about my notebook.

Theo and several other upperclassmen in the department seem to have formed a sort of unofficial exclusive boys club, and they parade about with the air of being elite. Although I know Leanne wouldn’t ever admit it, she really wants to be seen as one of the brightest and best in the department—after all, she’s smart, ambitious, and has a well-disguised chip on her shoulder. Inclusion in Theo’s little group would mean she’s gained such a standing in the eyes of our peers. So, of course, she wants to accept his invitation and, of course, I have to go with her.

“Sure,” she answers, doing a much better job of sounding casual and unconcerned than I would. “We were just talking about dinner. The Box sounds good to me. Mia?”

“Yeah,” I automatically reply, knowing that Leanne would be furious with me for abandoning her at such a crucial social juncture.

At least Tristan seems to have disappeared. Plus I am starving, and the Box does have a real menu—not just bar snacks. If I’m going to be stuck listening to Theo drone on and on all night, then I’d rather be able to munch down an endless supply of French fries while I do it.

“Splendid! So…” He flashes that fake-charm grin at Leanne. “What did you think of Bogner’s lecture yesterday?”

“Well, I thought his main point was fair—” They fall into step beside each other, and Chase and I walk behind them. Luckily he seems content to listen to them do the intellectualist’s dance rather than try to strike up a conversation with me.

I wonder why Tristan isn’t coming. He and Theo seem to be buddies. Not that I want him to come—I don’t. But it would probably be less boring if he did.

If Theo really doesn’t understand the difference between defining terms and determining source in relation to MacIntyre’s argument, then I can’t “continue the discussion” with him. Unfortunately, Leanne will want to impress him enough that, even though I’m right, she will be annoyed at me if I press my point. So I’m staring down the barrel of several hours of faking interested nods, munching French fries, and drinking the most watered-down beer available, when what I’d really like to be doing is sleeping.

—

When we get to the Box, it is not yet crowded, but it’s Wet Wednesday, so it’s only a matter of time before the people smart enough to not take Thursday classes show up to get wasted. The hostess leads us to a booth that is far away from the speakers, and thus conducive to conversation. I’ve barely opened the drink menu when Theo tells the waitress he’d like a whiskey sour.

She looks expectantly at the rest of us. “Hemingway,” Chase says.

“What do you recommend?” I ask, having not had a chance to actually look at the menu.

“You seem like a Marilyn Monroe kind of girl to me,” Theo brazenly replies.

“What?” I ask, genuinely confused. Did he not realize by the fact that I was looking directly at the waitress that I was asking her? “Is there a cocktail Marilyn Monroe was famous for drinking or something?”

“Oh no, no.” Theo chuckles and nods at the drink menu. Leanne holds hers out to me, pointing to the words “Marilyn Monroe,” under which the words “raspberries,” “beer,” and “tequila” pop out at me. Above and below it are more drinks named after famous people.

“I think I’m more of a Joan of Arc,” I quip back, trying to keep the snark out of my voice. I wonder what it is about Theo that I find so distasteful. I think it’s that he never seems real. Even Tristan, as disgusting as I have, at least until recently, unequivocally found him, wears his assholeishness honestly. Theo seems like he might be just as much of an ass underneath but is always in charmer-mode.

“How classy.” He smiles.

“I’ll have the Andy Warhol,” Leanne tells the waitress, handing her our drink menus.

“By the way”—he again shifts his gaze back to Leanne—“order anything you like, tonight is on me.”

My eyes instantly meet Leanne’s. I can tell from the twitches at the edges of her eyes and the corners of her lips that she’s trying really hard to not smile as big as she wants to. I look from Alex to Chase, not bothering to hide my confusion.

“This isn’t a date, right?” I ask. Under the table, Leanne’s heel stomps into my toes. I wince slightly but ignore it. I don’t care if that question embarrassed her—I already have more male attention than I want in my life, so if for some crazy reason either Theo and/or Chase has even the slightest interest in me, I want to squish it as fast as possible.

Theo lets out a great, fake chuckle. “No, no, just being chivalrous.” His twinkling eyes shift from mine to Leanne’s. “It’s the way I was raised.”

Leanne does something that is too close to giggling for my comfort. Eww.

"So…" Chase grins, flashing teeth that are unnaturally white. "We didn't get a chance to touch on it, but does anyone else think MacIntyre's interpretation of Nietzsche leans a little too utilitarian?"

"I don't know," Leanne begins, her face thoughtful, but her tone light and diplomatic. "I think he uses terminology that is common to the post-industrial utilitarians, but most likely, that's because they're his most direct predecessors."

Chase smiles, almost coyly. "He seems to put a good deal of emphasis on…"

Ah, I think, *the dance has begun again.*

I nod and frown thoughtfully, and do things to make it look like I'm listening, but I keep one suspicious eye trained on Theo.

Maybe I'm being paranoid but it seems like too much of a coincidence that Theo, who I know is friends with Tristan, and maybe Julian, has suddenly taken an interest in hanging out socially with Leanne and me. I mean, we've been in Y.U.P.S. with him and Chase for over two years and he's never once done anything to try to initiate hanging out beyond that, or even hinted that he had an interest in it.

Did Tristan tell him what happened, and now maybe he thinks I, and Leanne by extension, are some sort of sexual freaks? That doesn't really make sense, though, since Tristan was so paranoid about anyone finding out about him and Julian. So, maybe it is just a coincidence…a very, very strange coincidence.

Of course, Theo and Chase are both rumored to be members of the Skeleton Key, and we are on the verge of Tap Night…Tristan, with all his money and family connections is, I assume, a shoe-in for a tap. Perhaps they're just investigating him, and since he was *obviously,* according to

Leanne, flirting with me all night, Theo's just trying to gather info on a prospective member.

Or maybe it's not about me or Tristan and Leanne is a potential Key tap, like I know she secretly desperately wants to be. Maybe it's just a coincidence that he invited us after Tristan appeared at a meeting flirting with me. Maybe he would have regardless because it's actually Leanne he is interested in. *Hmmm…*

Theo catches me staring, but I do my best to summon the essence of a disaffected house cat and let my eyes slide to the food menu. I wonder how long I'm going to be stuck here. Judging by how much Leanne is obviously enjoying this, probably far too long. It's only been a few minutes, but it already feels like it's been a sludging eternity between now and when the waitress took our drink orders.

—

"You know, it's getting late," Theo finally says, almost three hours later.

Leanne deflates a little beside me; I am tempted to jump right over her and begin the lovely walk home in the February cold. In all fairness, this hasn't been truly awful. It's actually pretty fun to have drunk discussions about topics that are almost impossible to successfully discuss sober. And I love our waitress. She psychically knows exactly when to bring me new drinks.

However, I'm right at that point of drunk where I need to get home, get into the shower, and pass out, or I might start doing stupid things—like ask Theo if he knows where Julian lives. Or, even worse, when we get back to Berkeley, go knocking on Tristan's door and suggesting he show me.

"It is," Leanne says, quick to recover, "we should do this again sometime." Even drunk, she manages to say it like she's not particularly attached to the outcome. I wish I was that good at hiding how I feel.

“Absolutely. Say…” Theo grins—too wide, too charming. Eck. “You’re coming to Roger’s party, right?”

“Oh…” Leanne starts. I know that tone.

“Who’s Roger?” I ask so Leanne doesn’t have to admit that we weren’t invited and, at least in my case, didn’t even know about it.

“Roger Davenport, you know, graduated last year? He was in Hieronym’s with us last spring. Anyway, he’s having a little shindig at his apartment just off campus this Friday. You should come. There will be great people and better booze.” He flashes a cheesy smile as he delivers what he obviously considers to be a clever line.

I forget to stop myself from rolling my eyes. Hopefully neither of the boys noticed, or, if they did, they are drunk enough that it won’t stick in memory. I don’t care what they think, but clearly Leanne does, and I don’t want to be a bad friend by sabotaging her chance to make new friends—even if I do think these potential new friends are actually phony intellectual-wannabe snobs. Maybe that’s not fair but I don’t really care right now. Lately every interaction I have with men either seems to be terribly annoying or utterly discombobulating and confusing. Why couldn’t I have been a lesbian?

“Oh yeah,” she laughs, “of course. Slipped my mind.”

“Excellent.” Theo’s grin grows. “The Philosophy Department will be well represented with you two there.”

“Oh, who else is invited?” Leanne casually asks, but I can detect a slight shift in her body weight, a tip forward, more weight to her center, less to her side—the answer to this question will tell her by comparison just how exclusive, and thus meaningful, this party is.

“Besides the four of us? Just Lydia Whitmore and”—Theo shifts his eyes to mine, his grin, if possible, somehow quirks up a bit more—“of course, Tristan Masters.”

In the dim light, with my very slightly swirling vision, that grin seems to transform from phony and obnoxious to sinister and satisfied—like he's a spider that's lured us into his web.

I really do have a paranoid brain, don't I? Maybe this is why I've only ever had one boyfriend and I never have more than a few girlfriends at once. Maybe I just assume the worst of people and I've never noticed it before.

Eeeeeggggghhhhh, I internally moan. Definitely time for me to go home. If I'm going to start down a winding trail of drunk self-analysis, I would rather do it in the shower. Besides, it's very possible that last drink actually was one too many and there is vomit in my near future.

"Bathroom," I announce. Leanne scoots out of the booth to set me free.

I stumble to the women's restroom, land on the only empty toilet, and pull my phone out. For a second I can't remember if I'm going to call Azzi, Uber, or look Julian up in the student directory. Luckily, I've never looked anyone up in the student directory before so I quickly forsake that option. Somehow I combine the other two thoughts and end up calling Azzi and asking her to call Uber. After giving me a hard time for forgetting to invite her, she offers to just come and pick us up instead. This is probably for the best. It will be much harder for me to go knock on Tristan's door if we're hanging out in Pierson with Azzi until we sober up.

I flounce, wind, and twirl my way around people, somehow arriving back at Leanne, Theo, and Chase. They're all standing, so obviously the check has been paid and they were just waiting for me. I lace my arm through Leanne's and rest my chin on her shoulder.

"Azzi is going to pick us up," I say. I'm not sure if I'm whispering or shouting, but I know she hears me.

"Campus isn't that far," she laughs in response. "Let's just walk!" Her eyes flick to the boys as she says it. I know she just wants to walk with them, but I really, really don't want to walk with them. Considering I didn't

even want to come tonight, I think having my way on this is not that much to ask for.

“I don’t think I can,” I say, stretching the truth just a tad. I know Leanne would rather us not walk home with them than me puke halfway through us walking home with them. Again, I mentally thank the waitress—and Theo, I suppose, since he paid for it—for the constant stream of cocktails. For once, alcohol is getting me out of a situation I don’t want to be in rather than getting me into one.

“Okay fine. Do you guys want a ride too?” Leanne immediately offers. Eck. Maybe she’s too drunk to realize that I can puke in a car too.

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I could use the walk,” Theo replies.

Yay, Theo!

After a few generic parting statements—“Thanks for the drinks, next time it’s on me!” and “Great conversation, loved your point about Primordial Unity!” and “See you in Higgens—hope he’ll finally stop talking about Spinoza!”—the boys make their way down the street, while Leanne and I wait for Azzi.

When she arrives in her sleek red Audi, I take the backseat so Leanne will take the front. As soon as the doors are closed Leanne says, “So, party on Friday?”

“Who and where?” Azzi asks, somehow navigating the busy narrow streets of New Haven while texting with one hand and looking more often at Leanne than the road. Azzi must have a team of guardian angels constantly on call; I don’t know how else to explain the dozens of car accidents that she isn’t even aware *almost* happen.

“Roger Davenport’s. He graduated last year. Theo invited us,” Leanne says, sounding far too casual. But Azzi doesn’t notice and soon they are talking who is wearing what shoes, which I know from experience can go on for hours.

Grateful that I don’t have to take part in this conversation, as my feet are two sizes bigger than theirs, I stretch out as much as possible in the backseat. My mind plays back images of Tristan’s hand on my notebook and Julian’s gaze holding mine just a second too long in lecture. Part of me wishes I could tell Azzi and Leanne…part of me is really glad I have Tristan’s stupid blackmail as reason not to.

I guess I’ve accepted that it’s happened and it might happen again but I’m definitely not ready to think about it beyond that. Telling Azzi and Leanne would force me to. They’d ask questions and then I’d have to give answers, which means I’d have to think about answers.

I’m not ready for questions and answers. I’m not ready for anything. I don’t know why I’ve gone along with this not once but twice, or why I wrote *I’ll think about it* to Tristan. I don’t know anything except that I really want to be in a shower with endless hot water. And, maybe, to puke.

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Part Three

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— Mia —

There’s no way for me to not go to Roger’s party. It’s all Leanne has talked about for the last forty-eight hours.

She’s spent all year acting like she’s too busy to care about being tapped, but now that Theo Redwood has invited us to this party, I can *hear* her thinking about it. Because Roger graduated last year, it’s public knowledge that he was a member of Skeleton Key, so naturally, being invited to a party at his apartment by Theo, who is a rumored member, is a pretty clear sign that she is a *prospective.*

I do not expect to be tapped—nor do I care. From what I hear, I don’t really fit what Yale’s senior societies are looking for. I’m pretty smart and I want to do well in life, but I’m no record-breaking genius, and I’m at Yale thanks to financial aid and a scholarship—I don’t have a bunch of family connections or wealth. Plus I seem to give off the scent of “Not a Joiner” with the pungency of a frightened skunk. Leanne has wanted to be invited since freshman year—being invited means you’re seen as a winner, showing you want to be invited means you’re afraid you aren’t.

I suppose, now that I’m thinking about it, it really is pretty ridiculous that I assumed Theo’s invitation to the Box was because of me, Tristan, and Julian. It is perfectly possible that Leanne really is on their Tap List. Why shouldn’t she be? She’s smart and capable, bound for law school, interested in pursuing a career in politics, willing to be a team player, all qualities that seem to fall in line with what most of the societies want. I’m such a shitty friend for assuming the reason Theo and Chase were showing interest was because of my accidental clandestine sex life, rather than her merit.

Even though the requirements that come with society membership—meeting two evenings a week, among whatever other odd rules they may have—have always seemed like a time and energy drain I wouldn’t want, I can see why Leanne would. The kind of connections that come with

belonging to a society are useful. Plus, I hear they put on some really good dinners.

Still while Leanne is getting ready for the party and thinking about future career benefits, I am considering faking the stomach flu because Tristan and Julian might be there, and I don't know what will happen if they are.

Despite my best attempts to not think about them, the second my conscious mind loses grip of its train of thought, I derail into an odd assortment of memory and fantasy, all centered around them. The other day, I petted a stray cat that hangs out near Sterling Library and the moment my fingers touched his fur, I could feel the imprint of Julian's curls. In lecture yesterday, Tristan walked by me without saying anything—so of course I didn't either—but his shoulder ever so slightly brushed mine and I nearly leaned in, as if he'd instinctually know to catch me and—and what? We'd all three boink like bunnies while Dr. Bogner continued his diatribe on Friedrich von Schiller and the alienation of modern man?

I really haven't forgotten that Tristan is despicable or that Julian is my TA, who I know practically nothing about outside of academia, except that he has lower-back dimples…But over the last few days, those details have somehow become less important and now I'm standing in my closet, thinking about whether or not I own any article of clothing that could be considered attractive. After fifteen minutes of careful study, I think I can safely conclude that I do not.

Azzi would let me borrow just about anything I want out of her extensive clothing collection, but she's half a foot shorter than me and doesn't own a single dress that doesn't feature either sequins or rhinestones as the main attraction. Yale parties tend to be on the stuffier side, and I lack Azzi's magical mojo that allows her to get away with going completely left-field of social convention. So I leave my closet and decide I'll let Leanne dress me when she gets out of the shower. In the meantime, I'll do something sensible, like pretend to read a book.

—

After three shots of vodka each, Azzi, Leanne, and I get into an Uber and are dropped off in front of a perfectly nice apartment building. Its architecture is gothic like most buildings in New Haven; it has an elevator that runs like it hasn't been updated in a century and is oddly quiet for a Saturday night. When we arrive in front of door 322, the only music that can be heard coming from inside is slow jazz.

Leanne knocks on the door and smooths her classy black dress down as she grins anxiously. Azzi's eyes catch mine, and I know that she's already decided this isn't her kind of party. I silently plead back that she not abandon me too quickly. The vodka took the edge off my nerves but I'm still feeling unsettled about this little shindig. I don't know what would be worse—if Tristan and Julian are there, or if they aren't. I do know that, regardless, Leanne is going to get swept up and want to stay for a long time.

Roger, who I do remember now that I'm seeing his face, opens the door and graciously invites us in. He is holding a martini glass. We slip out of our coats and leave them on the stair banister with everyone else's. He immediately directs us to the bar—yes, an actual bar, in his apartment—where there are more types of stemware than I knew existed and a uniformed man wearing a badge that says "Mixologist." *Wow. These guys party real fancy-like*, observes my inner hick.

Once there is a glass of red wine in my hands, tequila in Azzi's, and scotch in Leanne's, the slow circling of the room starts. There are at least twenty other people already bunched up into small groups. None of them are Tristan or Julian. But there are a few figures out on the balcony whose faces I can't see, a man and woman.

I suppose that the man could be one of them, but I'm not going to go out there and check. The notion that either of them might be out on that balcony chatting up a woman whose silhouette suggests that she's tall, slim, and unnecessarily gorgeous makes my stomach feel sour. Consciously realizing this makes everything else in me feel sour.

I follow Azzi. It doesn't take her long to pick out the person most likely to have a joint. He's a freckle-faced, red-headed boy with a five o'clock shadow and eyes that are just a touch glazed over.

“Hi,” Azzi says, shamelessly cutting into the conversation he was having with a guy I don’t recognize and a girl I do—a senior English major, I think. “I didn’t know you guys were going to be here,” she says to the English major, who looks confused by her interruption. “So…” She turns to the red-haired boy. “Anyone had a reason to check out the balcony yet? Bet the stars are amazing.”

The boy’s eyes land on Azzi’s abundant cleavage and remain there long enough to let me know that her stoner radar is, as always, accurate. “Yeah, I have,” he answers in a dopy, friendly sort of way. “I’ll do some star blazing with you.”

The English major and the other unknown guy exchange a glance, and I accidentally catch the back end of it. I wait for any sign that the redhead realizes he’s said “blazing” instead of “gazing.” None comes, at least not before Azzi’s got her arm through his and is flirtatiously dragging him to the glass doors.

Although I have no interest in smoking anything—tried it once, it hurt like hell and my lungs were in pain for hours—I also have no interest in trying to make awkward conversation with two people I don’t know. So, I flash them a smile that I hope says *Sorry my friend stole your friend!* and quickly follow after Azzi.

I push past the curtains on the balcony and step out. Now that the man is fully in my view, I can see that it is indeed Tristan talking to the woman. His platinum hair is draped over her shoulder, obscuring both of their faces as he whispers in her ear, but I know that it’s him. No one else on the entire campus, probably the entire world, has that hair.

I turn my back to them and pretend to be engaged in whatever conversation Azzi and the guy are having. It doesn’t take the redhead long to pull out a joint and light it, nor does it take her long to take it from him. I hear the girl Tristan is with laugh coquettishly.

He’s not that charming, I think with unreasonable disgust.

This continues for several minutes—bouts of giggles following whispers that are just quiet enough I can't make them out. During this time, I drink my entire glass of wine, Azzi's eyes grow bloodshot, I find out the guy she is talking to is named Doug, and their conversation about modern ethics quickly turns to how the Philosophy Department should teach classes utilizing South Park episodes.

Azzi sucks the joint out and then shivers. She grabs both my and Doug's hands and says, "Let's go back inside," at the exact same moment that Tristan and his conversation partner decide to do the same thing.

My eyes meet Tristan's as we all collide in front of the door. While I'm pretty sure my face is revealing a million things I didn't even know it had to reveal, his remains utterly calm.

"Oh hey, Tristan," Azzi says, but doesn't cease pulling us back inside. Azzi and Tristan have known each other since childhood because their families move in the same rarified East Coast circles. They aren't exactly friends, but they don't have a problem with each other either.

"Lady Azar," he replies with a little smirk, his eyes still on mine. Once we're on the other side of the sliding glass door, Tristan's girl tries to step away, pulling him with her, but he holds back, and we all fall into a conversation circle. My insides are having mixed reactions to this development.

"Hi." Azzi holds out her hand to the girl on Tristan's arm. "I'm Azzi, and this is Mia and that's Doug. So who are you?"

"Roxanne," the girl replies, tentatively taking Azzi's hand. Judging by her accent she is Chinese, and Roxanne is not her real name. Around her wrist is a bracelet made out of a lot of diamonds that I'm pretty sure are not fake. Her features are striking; her hair is long, shiny, and thick; her eyes bright and intelligent.

"Roxanne was just telling me about her first year at Harvard Law," Tristan says. "Roxanne, Azar is a fellow junior. She's majoring in economics. Her father is Mohammad Ab'shadu Jengali."

“From Tehran?” Roxanne politely inquires, although I get the feeling she already knows the answer.

“Yeah,” Azzi says, “Tristan and I have been friends since, like, diapers. Mia is a philosophy major like Tristan and Doug…?”

“Graduated. I’m at Morgan Stanley,” Doug replies.

“Are you planning to attend law school as well then?” Roxanne asks me. I can tell she just wants to go back to talking to Tristan alone, but she’s got too many social graces to show it.

I barely stop myself before saying, *“No, I’d like to actually make the world a better place.”* However, my time at Yale has taught me that any negativity toward lawyering as a profession is strongly frowned upon. Instead I simply say, “Journalism.”

“Oh yes,” Tristan drawls, “Mia won a Pulitzer Prize for an editorial she wrote in high school and she’s been sharing her opinions with us all through the *Yale Daily* ever since she arrived.”

I’m about to say something very witty back—I swear I am—but in the fraction of a second it takes me to think of that very witty thing, I hear the room go silent. So I give up my witty comeback in favor of discovering what has happened.

Everyone is looking at the doorway, where Theo stands, holding the door ajar. His back is to me, but even from here, his shoulders look tense. In front of him stands Julian with the same easy smile he always has. Azzi instantly lets go of Doug’s arm and breaks the frozen silence.

“Julian!” she shouts enthusiastically, as she weaves through the room. “You made it!” She shimmies right past Theo and wraps her arms around Julian’s neck—a feat which, even with her five-inch stilettos, she is nearly too short to accomplish. Julian bends down to meet her.

Azzi seems to have released whatever momentarily held the room captivated, and while a few eyes still linger on her, Julian, and Theo, most

people go back to their conversations and their drinks and the party continues. I cross the room to join them, having decided that I'd rather find out how Julian and Azzi know each other than spend another fraction of a second with Doug, the stoned guy I don't know; Tristan, who I mostly wish I didn't know; and Roxanne, his gorgeous law-student date.

"Seems I'm quite the party crasher." Julian chuckles lightly. However, there is a glint in his eye directed at Theo that lets me know there is a reason beyond simply being unexpected that his appearance interrupted an entire party.

"Hi," I say, "umm, that's funny you guys know each other. I mean, I just, because Azzi isn't in the department, I just assumed you wouldn't have met. I—"

"We're in the same yoga class," Azzi explains. "I figured, hey, if I'm going to a party with a bunch of philosophy dorks I might as well invite one I know I like."

"That makes sense," I think out loud. Azzi, Theo, and Julian all look at me in question, although judging by the little quirk at the edge of Julian's lips, I'm pretty sure he knows exactly what I was thinking about. My whole face heats up with embarrassment. All right, clearly I've had enough to drink.

Luckily, the attention is quickly drawn away from me by Theo, who says, "Yes, it does," with a smile that would be warm if only his eyes weren't so icy. "Eastern philosophy is your intended PhD topic, isn't it?"

"It is," Julian answers, holding Theo's gaze.

Leanne comes up, weaves one arm through mine and holds out her empty wineglass with the other. "Hi, Julian," she gushes. An awkward half-second of silence hangs in the air. It feels like she's going to say something else, but then she turns to Theo.

"So, Theo," she says, "now that I've finished it, what is this mystery wine you gave me? It's delightful. I've got to get a bottle."

Theo takes Leanne's glass and folds her hand into his arm. "Before I start giving out names, I've got another for you to try—Petite Syrah, extremely robust." He whisks her back to the bar, but not without giving Julian one last look that could only be described as a warning. A warning of what though?

"Hey, so you guys know each other, right?" Azzi asks, already looking around.

"Julian is my TA," I practically squeak. I wished I still had wine to sip.

"Oh cool, good. So you guys talk for a minute and I'm just gonna go find that guy again—what was his name?"

"Doug," I answer.

"Yeah, okay, so find like a corner or something? I'll be back in a minute." She spins around to walk away without further adieu.

I turn to Julian and smile awkwardly. I can't gage how well he and Azzi know each other by the exchange I just witnessed—Azzi acts familiar with pretty much everyone. I hope he knows her well enough to know that about her. Otherwise he might think that her immediately leaving us alone together is because she knows about us having sex. However, asking him anything that might lead to enlightenment on these subjects is more mortifying than just being left to wonder so instead I say, "So, yoga?"

"Don't tell, but I'm a virtuist at my core. My career obviously keeps me covered in the mind department and I think I'm doing all right with soul, but yoga, among other things"—there it is again, that twinkle, that silent laugh that can only exist between people who share secrets—"is how I cultivate my body. Have you ever tried it?"

"No," I admit, as I back up to the staircase, which is the only corner-like part of the apartment that is not already inhabited.

“Well, what do you do to cultivate your body?” he asks, following me slowly, his lips curling up into a smirk that is somehow both fond and predatory.

“I uh, well, I…” I step backward onto the first stair. This makes me almost as tall as him, which, instead of making me feel less *whatever* I’m feeling, only makes the path between his lips and mine more direct. “I—I like to dance.”

“What sort of dancing?” he asks, his tone light and conversational. Maybe I am imagining that he’s just a little too close to me, that the way he followed me backward toward the stairs is anything other than what is necessary to continue a polite conversation.

“You know, just dancing.” I sort of laugh. “Like, I put on music when I’m alone in my room and just move to the beat. Even if it isn’t structured exercise, it’s definitely exercise.”

“That makes sense,” he echoes my words. This time I know I’m not imagining that playfully coy little quirk in his smile.

The most I can manage in response is to keep breathing. I used to think I was good at witty banter. I was wrong. Or at least, I’m not any good at it when the person I’m bantering with is so very kissable.

— Tristan —

I’ve got one eye on Roxanne Yang and the other on Julian and Mia. I wonder why Theo invited her. I’m pretty sure neither she nor her friend are prospectives.

I know that Theo and Julian have a beef, and judging by Theo’s reaction to his arrival, he did not know Julian was coming and is not happy about it. I can’t help but think that this is not a coincidence. Does Theo know something? And if so, what exactly? I need to know but I can’t ask him.

I glance to the left and see that Azar has captured Douglas Adams again. Azar could be a tap for any of the societies given her family's wealth. It seems more likely that she was invited and brought her friends along rather than either of them being invited…I'll just ask her about it. Doug is so stoned that as long as I'm subtle I should be able to ask what I need to in front of him without worrying that he'll put together anything worth telling.

I wait for them to go back out onto the balcony. In preparation, I manage to steer Roxanne into conversation with Olivia Winthrop and Cameron Coulter, both rumored members of Scroll and Key. I get them talking about options in trademark law, a specialty that has made Olivia's father one of the most successful lawyers in Manhattan.

It doesn't take long for Azar and Doug to make their way back to the balcony. I wait a few minutes to ensure Roxanne is properly engaged. Our families have recently become entangled in a merger, and my mother would be furious if she heard anything to indicate I'd been less than a proper gentleman with Roxanne. Luckily, Olivia is good at making every bit of information she's got sound juicy, and it's been over a minute since Roxanne even glanced at me. I excuse myself to use the restroom, then maneuver a loop around the room so I can skirt out onto the balcony unseen.

I stand on the other side of Azar and hold my hand out for the joint. Over her head Doug and I exchange a nod. "S'up, Trissy?" Azar says as she passes the joint to me.

I hate being called Trissy. She knows this. "Just needed to be less sober." I shrug, taking a drag. Doug always has the good stuff. "Didn't know you were interested in joining?"

"I'm not," Azar says. "My friend Leanne is, I guess. Theo invited her; I just came for the booze." She jiggles her glass of tequila, which she carelessly dangles over the edge of the balcony.

"Leanne is the one who was invited?" I clarify, just to be sure.

“Yeah.” Azar shrugs. “She and Mia hung out with Theo and Chase the other night and hit it off. I didn’t know that Leanne was a prospective, but then again, I don’t really care about those things.”

“You’re really not going to take it if you get a tap? Even for Wolf’s?” I ask, genuinely curious.

Azar and others like her have always been somewhere between baffling and downright annoying to me. They take wealth and power for granted and aren’t interested in actually growing it themselves. Like they don’t realize they aren’t the ones who have the money and influence—their families are. The only way to truly have it is to be the one in control. To do that, you have to do more than just inherit, you have to play on the world board. Joining the right society is a very, very important step if that is your goal, as it is mine.

“I don’t think so.” She takes another drag, then hands the joint back to Doug. “I mean, maybe if I’m tapped, my intuition will lead me to follow, but I won’t know until I know.”

“Cheers to that,” I say, knocking my glass into hers. We both take a drink and then, staring out at the pedestrians below us, I say, “So either of you know why the TA is here? It’s pretty clear that this party is for prospectives, and he was never a member, right?”

“Oh, Julian? I invited him,” Azar says. “He’s my yoga buddy. I didn’t know this was a Key mixer, I thought it was just a philosophy nerd party, and he’s totally nerdy. You’re in Bogner’s class with Mia and Leanne, so you know him, too, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “And your friends are in Berkeley with me, but other than that, I don’t really know them.”

I hyper-focus on her face, looking for any reaction to what I’ve said, hunting for any indication that she knows I’m lying. I get nothing, absolutely nothing. So Mia still hasn’t told her friends? What a good secret keeper. This helps me relax just a bit.

Doug passes me the joint again. Doug and I know each other because he went to Hotchkiss Prep with my cousin, where he knew everybody because he always had the best drugs. Clearly, nothing much has changed about him.

"So what's your favorite yoga position?" he asks Azar, obviously horny. I guess they've never met before. Well, if they aren't a stoner match made in heaven, I don't know what is.

My mind quickly irons out the math of the information I've collected. *So Mia and her friend Leanne were invited, and they invited Azar who invited Julian. Julian being here is complete coincidence, then, and it has nothing to do with Theo. Which means it is not an indication that Theo, or anyone else in the Brotherhood, knows about me and Julian.*

Theo probably thinks I'm out to bone Mia; after all, I wasn't exactly subtle at the Y.U.P.S. meeting. That shouldn't matter though…unless that is the reason he invited her. If she's not a prospective, why would he care if I'm trying to bone her?

Maybe her friend really is a prospective—I can't see why though. She's nothing special, no family background, no huge academic honors, nothing that should make the Brotherhood interested. Is it possible Mia is a prospective? Doesn't seem likely, and she's never been invited to one of these events before. Of course, neither has her friend…

And then the math starts to look bad:

So Theo's interest in them must be because I showed up at the meeting. Maybe he's trying to get information about me out of them? That could be very, very bad. Theo hates Julian, and my…extracurricular activities would cause problems under any circumstances, but the fact I'm with him would keep me out of Key. No question. Shit.

I immediately shut down this line of thought and take a deep breath. This is no time to panic. If Mia didn't tell Azar then I doubt she told her other friend. If she had, it certainly would have shown at the Y.U.P.S.

meeting. So I don't really need to worry. Anyway this is exactly the reason I got blackmail on Mia in the first place. I should be fine.

Unless she's so drunk that she'll just not think about what she's saying…Or unless there's something in her drink that will make her not think about what she is saying. Double shit. Mia's with Julian right now though. As long as she's with Julian, Theo won't ask her anything that could incriminate me. He won't go near her, in fact.

I take another long drag of the joint. This stuff is strong. I hand it back to Azar. "Gotta get back to my date," I say in parting. They both nod; obviously neither of them particularly care—they're busy flirting.

I slip back inside. Roxanne is still talking to Olivia and Cameron. I make sure to stay out of her line of sight as I work my way back toward the kitchen. I don't see Mia, Julian, or Theo. Fuck.

I work my way around the room, wishing I hadn't taken that last drag. My brain is too fuzzy. Fuck, that stuff was really strong. I'll have to get some from Doug.

I somehow manage to make it through the kitchen, the downstairs bedroom, scout past the bathroom, and circle through the living room without catching Roxanne's eye—lucky me. Unfortunately, I don't see Mia, Julian, or Theo anywhere, which means they either left or they went upstairs. It's unlikely Mia left without her friends, so upstairs it is. Careful to make sure no one is watching me, I sneak up.

There is a loft area and three doors, all closed. There are only two people up here. I can't see their faces because they've got them glued together, but I can tell from the backs of their heads that they aren't my lovers and neither of them is Theo, so I don't care.

I put my ear to the first door and hear nothing, so I gently knock. No response. I open it and discover that it is a closet. I do the same with the second—it's an empty bedroom. The third, I do hear muffled voices from—too faint to make out the words or to distinguish whom they might belong to.

I hesitate before knocking. Given this is a party full of Keymen and prospective Keymen, I don't want to walk in on anything that may cause problems for me in the coming weeks. However, for all I know, Julian left and Mia and Theo are in there and he's asking her anything he can think of. That would do much more harm to my ambitions than interrupting before Theo found out anything—assuming he hasn't already.

I knock on the door, prepared to play the harmless drunk looking for the bathroom if need be. The voices immediately quiet. This sends my paranoia through the roof. I open the door, my mind racing with all the ways to lie, misconstrue, and manipulate my way out of anything Mia might have said.

To my relief the first face I see is Julian's, the second is Mia's, and Theo is nowhere in sight. The two of them are sitting on a bed, close enough to each other that I might have walked in on something, but not something that has gone far enough for clothing to be removed. Mia's hair looks just a little messed up though, messier than it did last time I saw her, and even in the dim light I can make out the bulge between Julian's legs. I guess I did walk in on something.

"Dumb of you not to lock the door," I drawl as my eyes shift from his crotch to hers.

Mia instantly flares up. "We didn't lock it because we were waiting for Azzi and—and just talking." She loses some of her gusto near the end though.

"Liar," I state—it's not even an accusation, just an observation.

"We were…" she weakly insists.

"We were," Julian says, "...until we weren't."

His eyes beckon me toward them. I stand firmly where I am. This is the worst possible place to get wrapped up with them, no matter how appealing the idea might be.

As if Julian knows what I'm thinking he turns back to Mia and slides his hand up her thigh. Mia, to my great surprise, does not stop him or protest or do any of the things I'd expect. I guess she's finished "thinking about it," then.

I watch his fingers slide all the way up until they hook into her panties. Her fingers are in his hair, trailing up and down his neck as they slowly kiss. What is it about the way they kiss that instantly makes my balls tighten and my legs feel weak?

You need to turn around and walk away, the rational part of me insists. *You're in Roger's apartment and half of this party is Keymen. This is not the place to get caught with Julian or have Mia freak out and run away because she can't deal with the fact that she likes double dick.*

But now he's leaning her backward, and her thigh is rising. The lines where her thigh meets her pubic bone give way to slopes of flesh on either side, and I want to bite into that little dip. As she lands fully on the bed her dress pushes back and her pussy is obscured by only his fingers, reaching inside her tight little panties, which the not rational part of me wants to rip off with my teeth. *Fuck.*

— Mia —

I lean back onto the bed as Julian teases my entrance by sliding his fingers through my folds without actually slipping them in. I have definitely had enough to drink because I really don't care that I'm about to have sex on a stranger's bed while my friends are downstairs. I am even drunk enough that I don't need to run the loop of all the reasons Tristan is too objectionable to have sex with before finally giving in. I am drunk enough that I can fully admit to myself that I want Julian and I want Tristan and the very idea of having both of them, either of them, watching them fuck each other, all of it, it all turns me on.

I moan as Julian lets go of my lips and latches onto the skin where my jaw and ear and neck meet. He's so smart. He's learned my body so well

from only a few encounters. I wonder what he'll learn from this one?

His fingers move just enough to capture the nub of my clit between his knuckles. He continues to rub up and down, up and down. I wonder if he could somehow know that he's doing enough to make my thighs melt and my labia engorge and my entire reproductive system throb with desperation, but not enough to bring me all the way to orgasm.

His lips land back on mine. With one little swipe of his tongue, my lips part to welcome his kisses. I must be imagining the emotion they seem to hold. His kiss is soft and sweet, but it doesn't need to be—right now, I don't need to be coaxed. I know what I want.

I suck on his bottom lip a bit harder but then pull away. He half-opens his eyes and rolls over, letting me climb on top. I do, but only long enough to pull one last kiss from him. Then I stand and walk to Tristan.

Tristan's face is almost pained. Torn. I wonder why he is hesitating now when he seemed so willing before.

I imagine that I am walking toward him slow and seductive, like Julian does, but I stumble and this makes me laugh. Considering my dress is still pushed up to my hips and what little makeup I put on has almost certainly smeared, I don't think my attempt would have worked anyway. Thanks to my good friend vodka, instead of being mortified, I just laugh harder.

I stop barely an inch away from him, our bodies perfectly aligned. My giggles fade, but my smile stays. I touch his stomach with the tips of my fingers and run my hands up his chest. They are almost to his neck when he catches them.

I rock onto the balls of my feet and lean in. My nose brushes his, but he pulls back. "What's wrong?" I ask, as if we have the sort of relationship in which I would care and he would answer.

"This is a bad time," he whispers, his voice tense.

“I thought you wanted to do this again,” I object, confused.

“I do,” he groans.

“Why are you whispering?” I giggle. “The music is loud!”

“Shhh,” he hisses, his face twisting up with worry and even a touch of anger. I almost giggle again, but instead I push forward and up. This time I catch his lips. He pushes back against mine for just a second before breaking the kiss.

His hands still on my wrists, he forces me back, putting several inches between us. He looks over my head and says, “Julian…”

I turn around and mimic him. “Julian…what’s wrong with Tristan?”

Julian sits up and I see his pants are now completely open and he’s freed his rock-hard cock. His coppery eyes shift between us but land on Tristan’s. “No one saw us come in here,” he says.

“How can you be sure?” Tristan demands quietly.

“I’m always watching. I know how much it matters to you,” Julian replies, his voice steady as he very deliberately strokes himself. My eyes fixate on this and the urge to shove his cock down my throat fills me.

I turn back to Tristan. “Why do you care if people know you’re bi?” I ask. “This is the twenty-first century. It’s legal. No one really cares anymore.”

Tristan’s eyes harden. “Some people still care,” he says cryptically.

I think that if I wasn’t drunk it would occur to me that what Tristan just said matters. However, I am drunk, and Julian has me really worked up, so the rest of me decides that whatever Tristan is saying is just words getting in the way of what I really want, which is for both of us to be closer to Julian, with less clothes. So I say:

“Get over yourself. No one cares. Now come fuck us.” Then, in an undoubtedly failed attempt to be sexy, I walk away, back to Julian, sashaying my hips from side to side.

I wiggle my ass, which I know is halfway out of my dress, as I lower myself to the floor in front of Julian. My knees hit the hard wood, and I swear I can hear Tristan cringe at the noise, but I don’t care. I’ve got my hands on Julian’s thighs, tugging his pants and boxers down past his knees, and he is quick to help me. I cup his balls, firm and heavy, with one hand and push his legs farther apart with the other, so I can nestle between them.

The little burst of power that came from telling Tristan off sends a fresh rush of desire directly to my groin. I never knew being bossy could be a turn-on.

I take the tip of Julian’s dick in my mouth. His skin is soft and just a little salty. My intention to be slow and seductive is soon overcome by hunger for his little gasps and arching hips. With a deliberate twist I slide his cock all the way to the back of my throat. It takes me a few times, but pretty soon I find a rhythm that doesn’t trigger my gag reflex.

Julian’s little gasps grow into steady pants, driving me on. His fingers wind into my hair, pulling it into a ponytail. With it out of the way, I push my own boundaries, forcing his cock deeper into my throat than I knew was possible.

Behind me I don’t hear the door opening and closing. Although it’s hard to be sure over the music, I’m pretty sure I do hear the lock clicking into place. The very idea that Tristan couldn’t help himself, that he couldn’t walk away, sends a fresh wave of hot juices into my panties.

I suck Julian’s cock in deeper, stretching my tongue as far down the base as it will go, using my fingers to tease the delicate skin between his shaft and balls. I keep my face there as long as I can, sucking and licking, and only coming up the bare minimum of air before plunging back down. I want him to come in my mouth. I want to feel his legs shake. I want to give him something they’ll both want again, because, it turns out, I want this to happen again, after tonight.

Footsteps.

I don’t stop what I’m doing but I feel legs come to stand on either side of mine. I feel that another body is now positioned only inches away from me. Julian’s fingers loosen on my hair, but my hair does not fall. New fingers weave through it. I push my head up into them, then plunge back down onto Julian’s cock. This is good, this is—

“Oooww!” I am yanked up, up, up off of Julian’s cock. Tristan stands above me, pulling my head away.

“You’re pretty good, but let me show you how he really likes it.”

I bite my swollen bottom lip and move out of his way, very, very turned on by the idea of watching that.

Tristan sinks onto his knees and lifts Julian’s balls with his palm. He opens his mouth wide, but he doesn’t go for the head. He presses his tongue flat against the skin between penis and testicles. With just the littlest drag of his whole head upward, Julian arches his back, pressing his cock against Tristan’s face, and moans, “Oh gaaahd.”

I slowly crawl closer, wanting to see more. I perch on the bed next to Julian, so I can get a view from above. Tristan is repeating the same hard, small licks at the base of Julian’s cock, making them just a little longer every time. Each time his tongue comes up I wait for it to grab the tip of Julian’s cock, but it doesn’t. It seems like it never will.

I slip my fingers into my underwear and rub myself slowly. I have to do something to keep my urges at bay. I’m so turned on that it’s hard to stop myself from jumping onto that cock and riding it until I’ve come seven ways to Sunday…but if I did that, I wouldn’t be able to watch Tristan’s expert tongue at work, and I am really enjoying watching it.

“God,” Julian repeats, his hands clutching the blankets beneath us. His gasping lips, still swollen from our long, slow make-out session give me an idea.

I move back and slide my panties off, then roll over onto my stomach and crawl around the bed until I am behind Julian's head. I slip one knee on either side of his face, so close that his curls tickle my thighs as I lower my pussy onto his mouth. His tongue instantly reaches up to greet my lips. I groan in satisfaction as my juices seep into his mouth and I watch his pre-cum slowly trickle down and land on Tristan's nose.

Tristan opens his eyes and looks right into mine. Even in the dark I can see his pupils dilate with desire. Our eyes locked, I move my hands up my thighs, to my belly, pushing my dress up as I go, removing it slowly, keeping rhythm with Tristian's licks up Julian's cock.

Julian's tongue is inside of me, his nose brushing my asshole, and whatever spot he's focusing on right now is a very, very good spot. If I let myself give in to the pleasure though, then I won't have the strength in my legs to keep myself perched over his face and I'm not ready for this part to end. So I focus on Tristan's eyes, his tongue, and the dick I want to see him sucking, rather than just teasing.

I pull my dress over my head and toss it aside. Other than my bra, I am completely naked. Tristan's eyes shift to my breasts and I know he wants the bra gone too.

"Put his cock in the back of your throat," whispers a me that I have never before met.

Tristan doesn't do as I say right away. So I make no move to take off my bra. Instead I run my hands over my rib cage and cup my own breasts, squeezing them until they are nearly pouring over, but not quite enough to reveal nipple. Secretly, I hope he's taking notes on my squeezing techniques for our future encounters.

"Take off your bra," Tristan mumbles.

"Put his cock in the back of your throat," I repeat.

His eyes hold mine again, but this time when he raises his head, his lips fully cover the tip of Julian's cock. His long pretty lashes fall over his

dangerously entrancing eyes. I watch his head quickly find a practiced rhythm, bobbing up and down, shimmering like nearly-white silk in the moonlight.

Beneath me Julian's ministrations lose all their deliberateness, their control, and transform into gluttonous laps and sucks. I am commanding Tristan while riding Julian's lustful tongue. I feel powerful, which, it turns out, is so much more of a turn-on than just feeling pretty. A primal moan of satisfaction, physical and otherwise, rises up from deep inside of me as if to declare this.

I take my bra off.

"Shhhh!" Tristan hisses. I open my eyes, only closed for a second, to find that Tristan has now stood up, and he too is climbing onto the bed, over Julian.

He picks me up off Julian's face, hooks his elbow around my knee, and lowers me onto the bed, fast and deliberate. He's on top of me and the hand that isn't on my knee quickly finds the middle ground between my jaw and neck, not choking me, but applying enough pressure to heighten my senses. His lips are at my ear and he whispers, "Be as bossy as you want, but don't make any noise."

Before I can respond, his tongue invades my mouth and I am so fucking horny that I wrap my legs around his waist and press my pelvis into his, actually desperate for dick for the first time in my life.

He doesn't give it to me though. The fucking bastard, he's going to make me ask for it.

I break out of the kiss and he instantly latches onto my neck, sucking and biting. His hand leaves my legs and travels to my breasts; he grabs them just right—the right place, squeezing at the right angle with the right firmness. He *was* taking notes.

I cover my mouth with my hand to stifle the moans that want to come out and buck my hips up, rubbing my pelvis against his very, very

hard cock, which is pressed between us. He groans into my neck and quickly reclaims my mouth. I bite his bottom lip. I bite it so hard that a second later I actually taste blood, sweet and metallic. I suck hard at it, and move my hips around more, even faster, determined to drive him into me.

I reach down between our bodies and grab the head of his penis, then trace it down to the base. I try to pull him into me but he grabs a handful of my hair and pulls my head back, breaking our kiss. His intense eyes bore into mine, shimmering like liquid metal. “Tell me what you want,” he demands, his voice breathy and lustful. “Be bossy.”

“I want you inside of me. I want you to go as deep as you can and then I want you to hold still until I tell you to move.”

His lips curve upward. His fingers move between us now. He takes his cock as I let go, and then, with one quick hard thrust, he plunges into me, just like I told him to.

I gasp—no matter how turned on and wet I am, Tristan is big, thick, and a lot to accommodate. Luckily his mouth is already back on mine to muffle my noises and he actually does as I said—he holds still. My muscles throb and pulse around his cock, adapting to it. He groans into my mouth and soon I am gyrating and thrusting and dangerously close to bringing myself to orgasm—and he still hasn’t moved. He’s waiting for me to tell him what to do. The rush of power floods me again and I break our kiss, prepared to use it.

“Suck my nipples,” I whisper.

Without a word, without pulling out of me at all, he arches his back, curls his head in, and captures my nipple between his teeth with exactly the right amount of pressure, sending a whole new kind of pleasure coursing through me. Slowly he sucks the soft, sensitive flesh of my areola deeper into his mouth. I bite my bottom lip and thrust up harder and faster, but not quite fast enough to come—I want to draw it out.

I watch Julian get to his knees and bury his face in Tristan’s ass. I feel Tristan’s teeth loosen their seal on my nipple for just a second when he

groans. I can't see it, but I can imagine what Julian must be doing—rimming his ass. Yet Tristan holds still inside of me. I never would have believed such a spoiled asshat could have so much self-control.

I lower my hips just a little, sliding slowly up Tristan's cock, learning things about both my body and his from the slow, delectable sensation. My pelvic muscles clench and unclench, creating and feeding the throbbing, hungry heat devouring me. I could come, but I hold back. This is such a new experience of sex for me, knowing that I could come but feeling like I don't need to desperately grab the orgasm before its tiny window of possibility goes away.

"You're cruel." Tristan groans quietly, releasing my well sucked nipple only to capture the next. Still he does not thrust or gyrate or do anything. I am so impressed and so horny that I am just about to tell him to move when Julian stands up.

He bends over and grabs his discarded pants off the floor, digs around in his pockets, and pulls out the little bottle of lube he had on him in the philosophy lounge. In the moonlight I watch him squirt some into his palm and rub his hands together before spreading it over his cock. He steps back toward Tristan and whacks the top of Tristan's ass with his dick, teasing the asshole a little more….

"Wait," I whisper. Tristan groans in frustration and bucks into me just a little. Julian looks at me, continuing to slap Tristan's ass with his dick, but not putting it in. "I…" I bite my bottom lip; for the very first time since any of this started, I actually feel shy. I need more vodka. "I…"

"Yes?" Julian whispers, his lip curving up at the corner, his eyes twinkling mischievously. I think he knows what I'm trying to say.

"I want to be in the middle," I utter.

"Are you sure?" Julian asks, ever logical.

I nod. Tristan lets go of my nipple. His fingers land on my rib cage, and his hands slip under my back on both sides. He rolls to the side, pulling

me with him, so I’m on top now.

The knowledge of what is about to happen has jolted me back to sobriety. I don’t feel in control anymore. I feel nervous and virginal. But I do want it. I want to know what this feels like.

As if he somehow knows consciousness has jumped from my body to my head, Tristan thrusts up into me and rotates his hips, gyrating slowly, not letting my body forget the pleasure it was enveloped in before. His fingers weave into my hair and although I’m hiding my face in the space between his neck and shoulder, I can hear him smirk when he whispers, “Bookish little Mia Winters…who would have thought?”

Julian’s hands land gently on the small of my back. His fingers run up my spine, then his palms, warm, firm, and slick with lube, press flat and glide over my sides, to my hips. I feel his hard dick brush my ass cheeks. One of his hands leaves me.

The next thing I feel is a dull thud. He’s thumped his dick on top of my tailbone, just like I watched him do to Tristan. I can feel his balls and thighs press against me, and his hands go again to my back. He rubs little circles up and down, up and down the edges of my curves, easing my muscles back into a relaxed state.

I feel kisses on my shoulder blades, then one hand moving my hair aside. Julian’s chin hits my shoulder and Tristan’s neck twists to meet it. They kiss each other, hard but slow. My nervousness slips from the forefront of my brain, replaced by arousal as I watch, from the corner of my eye, their lips pull and suck at each other’s.

The base of Julian’s cock is rubbing up against my anus as his hands run up and down my back. Tristan’s come to join them. I lose track of whose fingers are whose as the throbbing between my legs starts to build again, and the instinct to grind takes over.

I rock back and forth, just enough to generate friction. My clit is already swollen and the pressure of Tristan’s pubic bone and the tickles

from his pubic hair promise that more than one type of orgasm is waiting for me. His hips thrust up to match my rhythm, and soon our pace increases.

The unexpectedly glorious feeling of Julian's cock rubbing against my ass, stimulating those very sensitive nerve endings, intensifies with our speed. It makes me weak and achy for more. I reach behind me and grab one of his wrists, half pushing, half pulling him downward. He catches the drift.

Both his hands slide their way over my hips and onto my ass cheeks. He takes one in each hand and stretches them apart. A tingle goes up my spine as air hits the virgin flesh he's just exposed. Slowly he worms his thumbs right to the center of my ass. The arousing pressure of his thighs and his cock vanishes, leaving me instantly bereft until seconds later I feel Julian's warm hot tongue.

"Gaahhh—" I moan. Tristan thrusts his tongue into my mouth, cutting me off. I've forgotten to be quiet again, but right now I don't give a damn.

Tristan grips my hips, forcing me to slow down. When we do Julian spreads my ass cheeks even farther apart, and goes from merely licking the outside of my hole to penetrating it with his tongue. It is the most bizarre sensation, yet somehow completely familiar, and after a few seconds, during which my body goes completely rigid and then relaxes again, I am actually whimpering with pleasure.

Julian expertly wiggles his tongue around. Inside of me it feels huge and even sharp at the tip, but just dull enough that it massages rather than pokes. I can feel that he's curling it upward, and as I regain awareness of the rhythm Tristan has never quite let stop, the indescribable sensation of his curling circles pulses down my legs and back up into my engorged clit, turning me into a puddle of desperation and want.

Tristan again adjusts the rhythm of his thrusts, slow enough for Julian to move with him and fast enough for me to soon be panting. I let my head down onto his shoulder. Up and down, in and out, around, around, rock, grind, toes curl, ankles flex, the tension between my legs goes from

high to extreme. I hear myself gasping and moaning and I'm writhing between these two men, possessed. I'm going to—

Abruptly, the amazing sensation of Julian's tongue in my ass goes away. Tristan's hands are immediately on my ass, and he thrusts harder and faster. I wanted to come with Julian's tongue in me, but I'm so close I don't think I can stop it. I don't think anything can stop it. Just a few more—

"Don't let her come until I'm inside of her," Julian seductively instructs, and Tristan instantly stops his thrusts.

I buck in protest. I am frenzied for release, but Tristan's hands on my ass hold me down on top of him. He is so firm that I can hardly move—*Fuck.*

His fingers spread across my ass the way Julian's did, opening me. After how amazing Julian's tongue felt, the idea of having his dick inside my ass arouses my body even more. My brain is strangely silent now. I feel the soft tip of Julian's cock graze my ass and then…

"Don't scream," Tristan whispers.

Before I can process what he means, his hands leave my ass, one lands on the back of my head, forcing my mouth onto the other, which has cupped it tight. Within a fraction of a second, Julian thrusts. I hear his balls smack Tristan's, and then I scream, or grunt, or something in between. I don't know and I don't care. That fucking hurt.

Tristan removes his hand from my mouth and instantly pulls my lips down to his. He kisses me hard, sucking my tongue into his mouth. His hands quickly travel to my breasts. He is fast and lusty, but I can sense some awareness, some sort of attentiveness in his motions that I never could before. I realize he is doing this to distract me from the pain.

Thankfully, Julian doesn't move at all, although he does release a long, low groan. Julian isn't quite as wide as Tristan, thank God, but he is longer. If he were any longer he'd be inside my intestines.

With goading twists and turns of his tongue coming one after the other, Tristan seems to redistribute awareness of my body to regions beyond my throbbing ass. When he pinches my nipples hard, so hard that I ordinarily would hate it, that pain actually helps to mitigate the pain of my ass being stretched wide by Julian's cock.

Slowly, I relax into the feeling of being, well, stuffed. It makes me sound like a turkey, but there is no other way to describe having two hard cocks inside of me.

Tristan rolls his hips under me. His cock pushes ever so lightly up and around, teasing me, and I swear it touches Julian's through my walls, which feel so thin and delicate. Tristan's rolling hip movements gradually turn into bouncing. Julian does not move, but he does wrap his fingers around my hips to hold me firmly in place, while Tristan slowly builds speed.

I don't take my mouth off Tristan's this whole time. The more sensation I'm feeling in other parts of my body, the easier it is for me to transform the experience of pain into pleasure. Even though I had a steady boyfriend for two years, I'm pretty sure I've never kissed someone for so long during actual sex.

Of course, it's not like it means anything. None of this means anything other than that…that I wanted to come the way they made me come before, again. That's why I'm here, drunk at a party, having secret sex in a stranger's bedroom. Because I'm horny and I wanted more, that's it. *Fuck. I need my brain to turn off again.*

I break from Tristan's lips, dip my head down, and find the most bitable part of his neck. I wind my arms under his shoulder blades, grip onto them as hard as I can and rock myself forward. I slide up their cocks, only a few inches but I feel my ass zip up immediately. I open my mouth, wrap my teeth around Tristan's neck, and push backward.

"Fuuuucckk," I whimper, biting Tristan to muffle my moaning cries as I slide back down their cocks. I feel like I'm going to be split apart. I

honestly can’t tell if this sensation is more pain or pleasure, but either way I want to feel more.

“Not yet, Mia,” Julian whispers, his voice strained and husky. “You’re not stretched enough yet.”

A low grumble rumbles up from Tristan’s chest. He rocks up into me, then back down. I throw my head back as my pussy instinctually clenches and curves to swallow his cock. Miraculously, Julian keeps his grip on my hips, keeping my ass in place despite Tristan’s movement.

Tristan’s rocking turns into gyrating thrusts, and my gasps of mingled pleasure and pain grow quicker and raspier. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he whispers in my ear, one hand in my hair, one hand wrapped tight and desperate around my back, crushing me to his chest.

As Tristan picks up speed the momentum becomes too intense for Julian to keep me completely still, so the base of his cock rims around the entrance to my ass. Although the sensation is much bigger, it feels a little bit like when his tongue licked me inside. The same nerves are getting triggered, including the ones that seem to have a direct connection to my clitoris.

I jerk my hips just a little, just enough to get that extra burst of arousal that comes from rubbing my nub against Tristan’s pubic mound. It’s like I can feel the electricity running all around my entrance, past the perineum and back to my ass. The sensations of one become the sensations of all. Pain bleeds into pleasure, this time enhancing it, rather than detracting from it.

Tristan snarls into my neck. His thrusts go from powerful to animalistic. He is up and down, in and out, around, around, rocking, grinding, gyrating, like he’s melding our flesh together, merging us. My calves flex, ankles twist, my toes stretch out, then curl in, and the tension between my legs is becoming unbearable.

“Please,” I find myself gasping, clinging to Tristan with one hand, the other wrapped behind me, desperately holding Julian’s thigh, not

wanting to feel even a millimeter less of him inside of me. The tension builds and builds, sending terrible, wonderful aches jolting down the back of my thighs. “Pleeeease…”

I cannot help it. I’m so close. I’ve never felt anything like this. I am nothing, absolutely nothing, but nerve endings that feel like they’re going to melt and explode at the same time.

I buck my hips back and forth, so fast and shallow that I’m practically vibrating. Tristan’s cock presses perfectly into my G-spot, and I almost swoon with pleasure. The inner lips of my pussy are swollen, throbbing, and trying to suck him even deeper into me. My ass is spread wide, a bastion of pain and pleasure, and Julian’s cock holds me like a lightning rod. And my clit—rubbed almost raw, but not quite—is electrified.

“Faster,” I gasp, my lips on Tristan’s ear. He pulls me back by the hair and bites my neck as he plummets deeper and deeper.

“Please, please, please,” I pant. The shakes are overtaking me. I can’t stop vibrating. I lose track of where my body ends and theirs begin.

Tristan swings his hips wide, thrusting up so hard that I think he’s lifted us off the bed. He pulls my hips up with him, then forces them back down, plunging both his cock and Julian’s deeper into me. As sensation rushes over me, I can feel the crescendo. The flood gates are at their limit. One more thrust. Just one more—

I bite down on Tristan’s neck so I don’t scream again, this time in pleasure—so, so much pleasure. Sound disappears, colors explode in front of my closed eyes. Utter loss of control envelopes me, clearing the way for a wave of ecstasy I could never have imagined.

Tickling, teasing, tugging sensation pools just behind my belly button and then warm, tingling aches leak down through my insides, melting and melding. The lips of my entrance pulse radically around Tristan’s cock, and my ass is practically swallowing Julian’s. I am painted

in pleasure that trickles to my thighs like sugary acid, dissolving my muscles, my tendons, my sanity.

"Fuck," Tristan growls, his neck curling around mine as he bites me back. Even in the thick haze of euphoria, I can feel his body vibrating too. I can feel his cock pulse as he releases into me, and I can feel my muscles sucking up his seed. Seconds later, Julian's lips are on my back, his hot breath tickles my spine, and I feel a second rushing gush of heat spill into me.

Julian leans down, sliding halfway out of me, as he kisses and sucks the back of my neck. Tristan's head falls back onto the blankets beneath us, his hair spilling out in every direction like a white-gold halo. Julian releases my neck, kisses me chastely on the cheek, and then, leaning forward to sandwich me in the middle, kisses Tristan softly on the lips.

I am complete putty, a blob of gelatinous oxytocin draped over Tristan's body, held in place by the light pressure of Julian's chest on my back and his knees against my outer thighs.

As I watch them kiss, I don't see lust or animalistic desire…I see honesty and innocence and love. I watch the way Tristan's jaw tilts open, the way he gently captures Julian's lower lip, the tiny upward quirk at the corner of Julian's mouth, soft, tender, filled with love and even protection. I spent two and a half years in a committed, long-term relationship filled with "I love you's" and promise rings and talks about the future…but as I watch them now, I'm not sure I've ever actually felt a kiss like that.

When their lips finally part, Julian flops to one side and I, slick with sweat, slide off of Tristan. I don't nuzzle or cuddle him, but I don't jump up and run away either. I just stay where I am, next to him, my shoulder pressed into his armpit, my neck curved over his elbow. On his other side, Julian lays with a big, dopey grin visible in the moonlight. We're all breathing hard, and I'm pretty sure I've gone numb from the waist down.

I don't know how long we lay there, breathing in silence, listening to the muffled cacophony of noises coming from the party below. I am

tempted to grab my wine—I was drinking wine, right?—but I'm afraid of shattering the delicate glass this moment is made out of.

It's not that I'm being romantic or that I want it to last. I just don't want this peaceful feeling to end and the thinking to start. I know it's just the hormones doing their job, yet I feel content in a way I've never felt. But of course, all good things must come to an end. And this one does, with a swift hard knock on the door, quickly followed by a turning knob.

Tristan leaps up from between us at nearly the speed of light and hurls himself at the locked door.

"Tristan?" Theo's voice calls. "Are you in there, mate? We've got a game of shots about to start but we're short one player!"

"Shit," Tristan whispers. Julian and I rouse ourselves, but with less urgency.

"A little busy, if you catch my drift," Tristan calls back, his voice again smarmy, self-importantly charmed, and utterly fake. Then he turns back to me and Julian, drunkenly looking around for our clothes, and his voice is back to, I guess, real. "Hide in the closet," he hisses to Julian. "Winters, go out first."

"What?" I whisper back feeling delirious, my brain and body flooded with oxytocin. "Why? They're looking for you."

"We'll hold the round for you!" Theo chortles back. I think he might have had a decent amount of whatever he's drinking too.

"No need," Tristan replies, instantly back to smarmy-charming-fake. Then, he turns to me, and the fear, the panic, the clenched jaw all return. It's so strange to watch someone flip in and out of dramatically different masks.

"Because," he hisses in answer to my question, "if you walk out first no one will question what I was doing up here this whole time, and no one will be looking for anyone to come out after me, so Julian will be able to sneak out later."

I almost argue, but the panic in his eyes is so intense, it stirs empathy in me. He really cares about no one knowing he's into guys. "Fine." I sigh.

Ding. Delicate glass, shattered. Moment gone.

I find my dress and sloppily pull it on. When it's over my head, I open my eyes to see Tristan has moved away from the doorway and is standing right in front of me. With sincere, serious eyes he whispers, "Thank you."

Oh shit, I think as I watch him tuck his shirt in and pull his shoes on. Actually feeling, well, feelings for Tristan is…is…something I was too stupid to not see coming. It turns out that no matter what I may have deluded myself into believing, I am not the kind of girl who can have sex with a guy three times and not develop some sort of vague warm fuzziness for him. *Fuck.*

Julian hands me my shoes. I slip into them as he slips into the closet. I look at my reflection in the dim light provided by the moon and the streetlamps. I gather my hair into a ponytail only to discover that there is no band waiting on my wrist.

With one last incidental glance at Tristan I grab the nearest cup, which I later realize is his, not mine, unlock the door, and open it. Theo's eyes register surprise when I step out, but that surprise quickly transforms into something smug, satisfied, something like *I knew it.*

"Great scotch," I say with a big drunk smile because I have absolutely nothing else to say, but I don't want him to think I care that he's caught me hooking up with Tristan. I head downstairs, hoping that by now at least Azzi is ready to go.

I find Leanne first. She is talking to Chase and Heather Sinclair, who is a fellow pre-law junior. I weave my arm through hers and instantly feel her tense up. *Great,* I think, *she's still in "impress everyone" mode.* Out of respect for this, I resist the urge to lean my chin on her shoulder.

“Hi,” I say to Chase and Heather when there is a break in conversation. “Leanne, have you seen Azzi?” I ask, knowing that I’m not going to be able to drag her away from such delightful company.

“Check the balcony,” Leanne says. I do not frown and say, *That’s the first place I checked,* like I want to. Instead I take the out and, with a little wave to Heather and Chase, decide to double back to the kitchen.

I reach out to grab the edge of my purse, a nervous habit, but there is no purse waiting for me to grab. *I must have left it upstairs*, I realize. *Damn it.*

I head back up. There is no one in the loft and the door has been left hanging a few inches shy of closed. I’m a step from simply walking right inside when I hear Tristan’s schmoozing laughter harmonizing with Theo’s cheesy chortling.

“Of course not, no, no—Mia Winters? No!”

I freeze. They’re talking about me? And judging by Tristan’s tone, it doesn’t sound like anything nice is being said.

“Good to hear. Don’t get me wrong,” Theo snickers, “I wouldn’t throw her out of bed myself, but she’s not really what a Keyman, or prospective Keyman, wants in a partner.”

What a crass, disgusting—

“Not at all,” Tristan heartily agrees. “I’m just following my father’s advice.”

“And what’s that?” Theo asks.

“College is for sleeping with all the women you’d never marry.”

“Smart man, your father,” Theo replies, with a whole new round of chortles quickly followed by a hearty slap to the back. “I could tell you were out to bag Mia when you supported her ridiculous nitpicking at the

last Y.U.P.S. meeting. That's why I invited her tonight, figured I'd help a friend out."

Disgusting fucking little—

"You and the bartender!" Tristan laughs like this is absolute high comedy.

I gnash my teeth together, no longer interested in restraining the snarls bubbling up inside. Allowing righteous anger to take control, I push the door open.

Surprise registers on both of their faces. For a split second I think perhaps I see something like regret or fear in Tristan's, but given what I've just heard, I'm quite sure I'm imagining it.

I walk right past the two of them and grab my purse at the edge of the bed. I sling it over my shoulder and then fix Tristan with the iciest stare I can manage.

"I won't bother to categorically break down why you both bring shame to our species." I slide my cold, hard eyes to Theo. "As more than one recent conversation has illustrated, you're most likely not intelligent enough to understand. However, for your information, I didn't sleep with Tristan because you invited me to a party with alcohol—I had already slept with Tristan and Ju—"

Something deeper than panic flashes in Tristan's eyes. Something more intense than fear. And when our eyes lock, my heart feels constricted. Fuck. Even now, at this moment, when I hate him more than I have ever even come close to hating him before, I am actually feeling sympathy for that lying asshole. Fuck.

"—just wanted to get off."

I see Tristan's tight chest fall as he exhales. Now he looks at me with utter disbelief, and traces of something like gratitude or hope. I don't know or care. I need him to know that just because I'm a decent human

being and I’m not ratting out his dirty little secret, that doesn’t mean I have any interest in ever speaking to him again.

“He was convenient,” I say to Theo, but keep my eyes on Tristan’s, wishing I had Superman heat-vision, “but apparently more drama than he’s worth.”

Without caring if either of them has anything to say in response, I spin on my heel and walk out, my head held high.

Back downstairs I resume my hunt for Azzi with a new vigor. I need to leave before the righteous anger consuming me reaches its half-life and I become vulnerable to the feelings of stupidity and self-anger that I already know are inevitable. I can’t even think about that right now though. I just need to leave.

I really don’t give a fuck what Tristan, Theo, or any of their little secret society friends might think. I don’t care if leaving makes it obvious that I’m upset. I didn’t want to come to this party in the first place. Leanne can stay if she wants to, but I’m out of here.

— Julian —

Shit! I internally curse the second I hear Mia’s voice. The sentiment just repeats as I stand trapped in the closet, powerless to correct what is happening. To say Mia is angry would be an understatement, and why wouldn’t she be? She doesn’t know Tristan well enough to understand what she just overheard.

My muscles are tense with the instinct to go after her, to explain, to try to stop all the misunderstandings and consequential drama that will inevitably interrupt the lovely little something that’s just begun. If I open these doors though, both Tristan and I are going to end up in a very awkward situation.

Theo is a well-trained dog of Skeleton Key and even though it's been a few years, my rejection of their invitation obviously still hasn't been forgotten or forgiven. I wouldn't be at all surprised if, with the encouragement of former members, he told the department about the TA hiding in the closet, spying on undergrads having sex, purely for spite. Even if Theo didn't, any association with me beyond my being his TA is bad for Tristan's ambitions to join the Brotherhood. So I have no choice but to sit in this closet until they leave.

"Guess you won't be tapping that again!" Theo comments jovially.

"Not a major loss," Tristan drawls in response. That little drag at the beginning though…Theo won't have detected it, but I know that's a sign Tristan is lying.

Tristan hasn't said it, but I can tell there is something special about Mia. She gets under his skin. The few times we've brought a woman into bed, it's never been more than once and she's never been anyone who knew anything about our personal lives, much less one Tristan shared a college and a dorm with.

"I've got the number of a great professional agency if you ever need one, by the way. Real classy, all business, no drama, good selection, often available last minute. Wonderful service," Theo offers.

How sweet, I sarcastically think, settling into a corner with the comfiest looking pile of unidentifiable objects. *The Brotherhood must really want Tristan if they're offering up prostitutes.*

"Appreciated, but I prefer to pursue and bag," Tristan replies.

"Ah, a sportsman!" I hear Theo slap his back, like the good ol' boy he is.

"Exactly," Tristan chortles back. "Speaking of which, shots?"

"Shots!"

If my brain could barf it would. This conversation has done nothing but reaffirm my certainty that rejecting the Brotherhood's invitation was the correct decision.

I hear footsteps and then a definitive click of the bedroom door. I wait a few moments in the closet, just in case they dally on the loft. Then, I wait in the empty room with my ear at the door for another minute or so before stepping back into the noise of the party.

I get downstairs and immediately start looking for Mia. Although she's demonstrated a tendency to bolt in the past, I have a fool's hope that she may still be here. However, that hope dissipates after two circles of the apartment. There is no sign of either her or Azar. I am too late.

I don't wait long to leave the party either. I suppose I just shouldn't have come, but when I found out Mia would be at a party that I knew Tristan would be at, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to get both of them naked without any nonsense about blackmail as an excuse. And I got my way, but the consequences weren't worth it.

Now there's a very high chance Mia will want nothing to do with Tristan, and maybe even me by extension. Tristan will almost certainly be mad at me for *almost* getting him caught, to say nothing about what a sour ass he's going to turn into when Mia doesn't forgive him…And I'm pretty sure she won't, at least not for a while.

As I walk the four blocks east and two blocks north back to my apartment, I begin running strategies in my brain, imagining all the ways I can maneuver the two of them to undo the unfortunate damage that has been wrought. Most ideas get quickly thrown away, but by the time I'm pressing elevator buttons and wriggling my key into my lock, I think I might have one worth trying.

- *— Mia —*

The next day Tristan saunters up to me in the dining hall and says, “Busy tonight?”

I stare at him dumbfounded for half a second, before I remember who I’m talking to. Of course he’s pretending nothing happened. With pursed lips and a haughty eyebrow, I do my best impression of a house cat and slowly turn my head away, as if he bores me.

Unfortunately, Leanne is sitting across from me, and of course she wants to talk to him—he’s legacy, he’s rich, he’s a star tennis player, he’s almost guaranteed a tap, and lately, he’s been friendly which makes Leanne sure that she’s being courted by a secret society. A theory that I had to hear about at three a.m., when she finally stumbled into our suite, still in a state of happy drunk; I myself had already progressed to the state of want-to-pass-the-fuck-out drunk.

“Umm, no, I mean, we don’t have anything going on that I remember, right, Mia?” Leanne says.

I sort of want to stab her. Clearly Tristan was talking to me, not her. But if I drag this out in front of her, questions will be asked.

I wish I could just tell Leanne what happened, that the reason Theo is paying attention to us is because Tristan is paying attention to me, and that those attentions are in no way related to academic merit, projected future prestige, or anything that makes one worthy of being tapped…But I honestly don’t think she’d understand. In fact, I think she’d look down on me for all of it and I just don’t have it in me to live with someone who thinks I’m either weak or a sexual freak or both.

“I’ve got to meet Joe about some *Daily* stuff,” I lie. “Two of the articles that are supposed to be in tomorrow’s paper got pulled by the writer and now we’re probably going to have to pull an all-nighter to fill their space.”

“Weird,” she comments in that oh-so-friendly social way. “Who did that?”

“Joe didn’t say. You know how he is about discretion.” I stand up and fix Tristan with a hard look that I hope he gets the meaning of before saying, “Bathroom.”

I hear Leanne laugh as I walk away. “Sorry, she’s just still a little hungover from last night. It was a great party, wasn’t it?”

I don’t know what Tristan says in response and I don’t care. I just want him to be gone when I come back. However, when I return five minutes later, he’s sitting in my empty seat, right in front of my barely touched food, and he’s charming the shit out of Leanne. Fuck.

I turn around and leave before either of them sees me. I’ll get coffee and some pastries at Atticus, then hide in the *Daily*’s office until Monday. By then he should get the hint. If he’s dumb enough to try to talk to me in class then I’ll start talking about things he doesn’t want talked about.

—

On Sunday, Tristan and I see each other in the hall, but he turns his nose up and pretends not to see me, as if I’m the one who’s wronged him. On Monday, we have no classes together and we continue to ignore each other. On Tuesday, he’s in lecture but doesn’t try to talk to me. Julian, however, does.

“Oh, Mia,” he calls, just as I turn toward the door. His voice is casual yet formal, exactly the way a TA would talk.

For a minute my mind feels like it’s been blinded by a spatter of stark contrast—the Julian from Theo’s party and the Julian of right now. They seem like such different people…Yet, unlike with the many different masks of Tristan, I don’t feel like either of these Julians is a lie.

This Julian is perfectly normal TA Julian, in a perfectly normal lecture hall, with perfectly normal post-lecture things going on around us. Nearby, the other TA's are casually chatting with each other. The professor is there, hurrying to pack his bag up and escape from the students trying to talk to him. So, autopilot kicks in and I act completely normal too.

"Hi," I say, then immediately start to think *Hi* is a very weird way to respond, even though maybe it isn't, and add, "I mean, what? Uh, what is it?"

"Hi." He smiles. "Would you walk with me? I'd like to talk to you about your last paper."

"Sure," I say, wishing I could come up with something—anything—wittier.

"Great." He throws his messenger bag over his shoulder, then politely motions toward the door, as if offering me right of way. I take it and we join the throng of people slowly filtering out.

He sounds so light and…and so like TA Julian that for a few minutes I actually think it's possible he does only want to talk about a paper.

"So even though it was a comparative analysis, you really turned it into more of a campaign for Kierkegaard as Aristotelian. Can you elaborate on what you feel are his ties to—"

Then we are out the door and in the hall and soon we are outside and both of us seem to have feet that are programmed to go to the nearest place with coffee, because that's where we end up. Then we're in line and I'm still trying to explain why I think that Kierkegaard's concept of despair actually supports Aristotelian ethics, so I don't notice that he's already pulled out his wallet and paid for my drink before I dig mine out of my backpack. Then I suddenly realize how stupid it was of me to think this really might just be a conversation about the paper.

"Thanks," I mumble.

By the time we sit down I have fallen awkwardly silent, but this doesn't seem to bother Julian. He smiles the same easy smile he's nearly always got, and blinks at me a couple times from across the table while I pretend to sip my way-too-hot-to-sip tea. Finally, just when I can pretend to sip no more, he takes pity on me and says, "How are you?"

I let out a sigh of relief. Even though I thought I didn't want to talk about it, it seems like it's suddenly become impossible to talk about anything else, so I'd rather just get it over with. "Well physically I was kind of sore, but no big deal. Thanks for the tea, by the way," I add, then I remember I already thanked him for the tea.

His smile cracks into an amused smirk and I see the flash of a child in his face—the snickering ten-year-old boy he must have been. "That's good. So, do you like sushi?"

"Who doesn't like sushi?" I reply, only to immediately become self-conscious. I'm not really trying to sound clever, but I curse myself for saying it anyway because it sounds like the sort of thing someone who is trying, and failing, to be clever says.

"Want to go to Masuhito's with me tonight?"

I want to say is yes, but instead I ask, "Is Tristan going to be there?"

"He doesn't have to be," Julian replies, calm and even and without any question over my objection.

"Do you know what happened at Roger's party?"

"Yes," he replies, blinking patiently at me.

"Oh…" I deflate, my eyes shifting from him to my tea. I stare very, very hard—obsessively hard—at the tiny steam-release hole of the lid. A flummox of emotions swirl to life in the pit of my stomach and are soon coursing through me, leaving nausea and something worse in their wake.

“What’s wrong?” Julian gently asks, tilting his head down, so he’s bent awkwardly and staring at me with big warm eyes from under curly thick lashes, with that sweet smile and treacherous dimple.

“I just…” *I just what?* I ask myself. And then the answer comes, out loud:

“I guess I thought maybe you actually wanted to talk to me, or get to know me, or something. But I get it, Tristan is your boyfriend and you care about him and you’re trying to do damage control or something for him. Look, he’s an ass, but I really have no reason to be surprised by that so I still won’t tell anyone anything, just like I said I wouldn’t before this whole thing started.”

Part of me watches in horror as the other part of me just prattles on uncensored, saying everything.

“But I really don’t want to have anything to do with Tristan, and you seem great, but you’re his boyfriend, and you’re loyal to him, and I don’t want to get mixed up in anything—just like I didn’t want to in the first place—and the other night, I was drunk and you were drunk and then he was there and drunk too and stuff happened and it’s fine, but it’s really for the best if it doesn’t happen again, so…so I should just go.”

I fling my knees around the edge of the chair to stand but as I reach for my cup I neurotically pause to, again, say, “Thanks for the tea.” This is a strategic mistake. It gives him enough time to reach across the table and cover my wrist with his hand.

“Mia.” He smiles kindly. “I’m not just ‘doing damage control’ for Tristan. And I was hardly drunk at that party—certainly not enough to make me do anything I wouldn’t have done completely sober. I am interested in you, and I really, really would like to take you to dinner tonight. It doesn’t have to be a date. And I promise I won’t even tell Tristan if you don’t want me to.”

“Is that…is that okay?” I ask. “I mean in your relationship.”

“Haven’t you noticed our relationship is a little unconventional?” he jokingly whispers, the mischievous sparkle of a shared secret dancing in his eyes.

“Oh.” I bite my bottom lip, feeling stupid, or naive, or something. “You’re in an open relationship? I just didn’t—”

“No.” He smiles again. “I wouldn’t call it that, but you and I going to dinner wouldn’t be a problem. We can talk more about it tonight if you want to. But I’m more interested in talking about you.”

This does weird things to my insides. Things that feel too light and fluffy to be based purely on carnal knowledge of what Julian can do to my body. “I don’t think that’s…I mean, there’s really…”

“Mia, I promise it’s just dinner if that’s all you want it to be. You know I’m getting laid, so I’m not after that. I just want to talk with you for the sake of talking with you.”

I take a very long, deep breath—the kind that makes my ribs feel like they’re about to pop—and then, because I am apparently even stupider now than I was when this whole thing began, I say, “Okay. Just dinner.”

—

Julian picks me up in a blue Prius. For some reason, this tickles me and I snort as I walk out of Atticus Coffee Shop, where I agreed to meet him—can’t have a grad student picking up an undergrad from a dorm, after all.

He gets out of the car and walks around to my side. This is so strange to me that at first I think something must be wrong—he’s come to tell me we’re not going to dinner after all, or something like that. But as I grow closer his serene smile only deepens. Then he grabs the handle of my door and opens it for me.

I slide in and position my laptop bag between my calves as he makes his way back around to the driver's side.

He is, in some ways, not so differently dressed than always—formal-looking slacks, shiny black shoes that I've always thought of as "fancy grandfather shoes," a nondescript tie…But now he's added a formal black jacket and left out the sweater vest, and the effect is quite different. His hair is still a touch disheveled, and curly, and longer than conventional, but despite that he looks more grown up like this.

"How old are you?" I blurt out as soon as he closes his door.

He smiles in amusement and meets my eyes in playful challenge. "How old do you think I am?"

"Twenty-seven?" I guess, because usually I think he looks hardly any older than me and right now I think he looks thirty, in a good way.

"Twenty-six." He grins.

"I thought you said this was just dinner." I wave at my body. "You look like you're ready to go to a wedding and I'm wearing jeans."

"It won't matter. I'm well-known enough where we're going that they'll overlook your jeans, which, by the way, look wonderful."

I roll my eyes, but with a big, dopey, completely involuntary smile on my face, I'm not fooling anybody. "Just dinner, remember?"

"Yes, yes," he agrees with a playful smirk, "just dinner."

—

It turns out that "just dinner" is just dinner, even though he pays for it, opens car doors, and we manage to drink a whole bottle of sake. He doesn't bring up Tristan the entire time, and even when I do, he doesn't try to defend what Tristan did or said or comment much on it at all except to

say, with a casual shrug, “Tristan has been raised to say what he thinks people want to hear rather than what he actually thinks.” And before I know it we’re back to talking about how the Baroque musical movement actually arises from Enlightenment-era metaphysicians.

When we part that night, it is with nothing more than big smiles. He doesn’t try to kiss me, and I don’t try to kiss him. I do think it’s safe to say our conversation has been flirty for most of the evening. Although I didn’t particularly want it to be flirty, I’m pretty sure I’d have been bummed if it wasn’t.

Fuck, I think, shaking my head as I walk up the path to Berkeley. My rational mind is already producing several reasons why even going to dinner with Julian is going to be counterproductive to my focus, which really needs to be directed at my classes and the *Daily*. Regardless, I can’t stop smiling.

The next day I don’t have any reason to see Julian, and I don’t, but Thursday after lecture lets out, we end up in Atticus, and we stay there for four hours—talking about a paper, of course. During those four hours I happen to mention that I was planning to go to the Vivaldi Strings performance at Eisenhower Library that evening, but Leanne told me earlier today she was too busy to go and I don’t really want to go alone. Julian mentions that he had been thinking about going and perhaps we could go together. So we do.

After the music ends, and the small crowd disperses, we wander around campus under the light of the full moon. I learn that Julian’s mother was a professional pianist before he was born, and that from the moment the two of them came home from the hospital, she would sit with him and they would play piano together for at least two hours a day. I learn that he grew up in South Hampton. I learn that his father is president of a bank and that they only saw each other for four weeks a year when he was a kid because his father preferred living in Manhattan with his mistress. I also learn that Julian was perfectly happy about this as a child because he preferred having his mother all to himself.

I tell him that makes me even more mortified that he heard me playing piano. He says I clearly have no training but do have a natural feel and offers to give me lessons. I tell him that I won't have time until I'm retired, but if he's still alive then I'll give him a call.

Then he asks about how I grew up. So I tell him about the little cul-de-sac in a little suburb of Seattle that I call home. I tell him about being opinionated but not popular, and how that led me to decide the best way to communicate with my school, and later my town, was through the written word. This led to the school newspaper, which led to the local newspaper, which quite accidentally led to an editorial I wrote being featured in the *Seattle Times*, which, also quite accidentally, led to a full ride to Yale.

I tell him about both of my parents having to work, and growing up spending a lot of time with only the internet for company. I tell him about staying up late with my dad, who loved to talk about anything you could find on the History Channel. I tell him about my kitten when I was six, who wanted to play at night, and how I had to lock her out of my room so I could sleep, and how when she ran away several months later, I thought it was because she believed I didn't care about her. To my great surprise, as I tell this story, a little swell of tears actually boils to life in my heart and leaks out at the corners of my eyes. Julian gives me a playful but empathetic nudge and remarks that his mother cried when their cat ran away too.

We do not talk about Tristan at all.

The next night Julian takes me out to dinner again. This time I think about wearing a dress, and then decide it will be harder to pretend it's not a date if I wear a dress. This gets me thinking about whether or not it's really not a date. It seems like it has to be. But I don't know.

For a week we find each other too often for it to be coincidence, and nearly always extend these unplanned hang-outs well into the evening.

Part of me likes that feeling of really not having any clear definition of what it is we're doing. It makes it easier to push the rational mind aside, to say, "It's not like I'm doing anything but hanging out with a friend," and the sort of euphoric adrenaline that has been coursing through me for days

loves that sort of uncertainty. Hormones are so weird. I sort of wish I was a neuroscience major so I could understand what's going on with me, but I have a feeling even knowing the name and function of every single synapse and all the chemicals that flow through them wouldn't help me understand this any better.

It's been over two weeks since whatever we're doing began. Julian tells me that he will be going to visit his mother over the weekend, but asks me if I'm busy Wednesday night.

"I'm busy in the way everyone is always busy." I laugh, thinking about the time-management lecture I got from Joe, the editor of the *Daily,* and Leanne, who is increasingly suspicious that I'm not really always in the *Daily*'s office. "But no, I'm not busy."

Tonight, we're eating wood-fire pizza and he's got sauce on his cheek, right where his biggest dimple is hiding. I reach out to remove it but just end up smearing it into his five o'clock shadow. He grabs my hand and sucks what remains of the sauce off my knuckle. When he lets go we both smile at each other and continue as if nothing happened.

Then he asks, "Meet me at the Harkness Auditorium at ten p.m. on Wednesday?"

Even though this is a weird time and a weird place my insides have all turned to bubble-fizz. I don't think twice before I say, "Okay."

—

My weekend is good and productive. I get caught up on all the class work and all the *Daily* work that I should have been doing instead of hanging out with Julian. Best of all, I get to sleep in.

On Saturday, Leanne confesses that she wishes Tap Day would get here already so she could stop being nervous, but says she and Theo talked for a while—again—after the last Y.U.P.S. meeting—which I skipped—so

she figures she's definitely being interviewed. I tell her that I'm sure she will be tapped by someone, and that if she's not it's really their loss. She gives me a disbelieving but grateful smile and asks, with a whisper, if I think I'll be tapped. I honestly reply that I don't think so, and then I make a smoochy face and start singing "Leanne and Theo sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S __"

Leanne throws a pillow at my face and tells me I'm five years old. I tell her I'm seven and we both crack up laughing, even though it really isn't that funny. I think we're both just happy. It's been a while since I've seen non-ambitious, non-serious Leanne come out, and maybe it's been a while since non-serious, non-ambitious Mia has come out in front of her. So we stay up until three a.m. talking like we're at a sleepover, and when I finally drift off, I just feel really, really happy.

By Monday, based on the complete lack of interaction that happens when we both end up at the vending machines, Tristan and I seem to have come to an unspoken agreement to pretend the other does not exist. This suits me just fine. I'm not exactly angry at him anymore, the sting of insult is gone and replaced by stupid girly happy feelings for Julian, but I know nothing good will come of talking to him.

The truth is, whether I like it or not, I am clearly physically attracted to Tristan. But my emotional reaction to overhearing his dumb comments to Theo indicates that sex and feelings are not separate for me. So silence it is.

On Tuesday, Julian and I share a secret smile, but he's got a meeting with his thesis advisor, and I've got a meeting with Joe, which I need to keep if I want to remain a candidate to inherit the seat of editor in chief. I try to focus in class, but my eyes constantly drift to the back of Julian's head, and my mind to the sensation of his lips on my knuckle.

I see him at Atticus that evening, but Tristan is with him. They don't look happy. So I walk away and try to squash the involuntary reminder between my legs of how good they both feel at the same time.

Wednesday evening, I decide not to go to the Y.U.P.S. meeting again because I don't want to get invited to any post-meeting hang-outs. Leanne

tries to talk me into coming at first, but when I tell her I just really feel the need to clean our suite, the fervor in her argument disappears. I make sure to be gone by the time she gets back so she doesn't ask why, for the first time in the three years we've known each other, I've put on mascara.

The Harkness Auditorium is relatively small and not often used. Trying to get to it when you've never been there is a bit like trying to navigate a multi-level three-dimensional corn maze, but I manage it.

A text from Julian tells me to go to the side door on the northeast side of the building and punch 8239 into the keypad. I step from the dark alley into an almost entirely dark room. I think twice about walking inside, but then I hear piano keys strung together into a melody that pulls me toward it.

As I slowly make my way through the dim room toward the light I collide with heavy curtains made of velvet and dust. *I'm backstage,* I realize. I follow the sound and the light until I stand at the edge of the curtains, looking out onto the stage, where Julian's fingers masterfully reproduce Mozart at a concert piano.

His eyes are closed. His mouth hangs open, his lips moving wordlessly. He seems completely lost in the piece. I don't think he knows I'm here. Maybe I'm supposed to say something, but I really don't want to interrupt either the music or the vision of him.

I don't know the name of the piece he is playing, but I can feel its magic moving in him. His head is bent, his back is straight but somehow liquid. His arms move like waves, always in motion but anchored to his shoulder blades, which poke out from under his white button-down shirt. His sleeves are rolled up and his tie is draped over the bench. This is the closest I've ever seen Julian to disheveled, and it is much more beautiful than well-put-together Julian.

The music grows in pace, the keys switch from light and airy to dark and intense. His brow creases as the notes he plays build to a crescendo, but his fingers remain loose even as they increase in speed. They are graceful and effortless, like dancers in a ballet. I am so very embarrassed that he

walked in on my piano doodling before—just playing random keys and chords, hardly knowing what I was doing.

Given what he told me about growing up with a professional pianist for a mother, I really shouldn't be surprised by his skill, but I am. Maybe because I can tell it's not just skill, not just practice that has led to perfection, it's soul. I can feel his soul connect to every note, so every note becomes an expression of his soul, just as it was an expression of Mozart's hundreds of years ago.

Slowly, the piece winds back down. When his hands pull away from the keys, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. A smile invades my face, spreading all the way to my ears. I move my hands apart. My wrists arch back, ready to come together in a resounding clap…but another clap hits the air first.

I step out of the curtains and look around for who else is here, but even before I hear the familiar, irrationally infuriating, drawl, I already know who it has to be.

"Over here, Winters," Tristan announces as he steps out of the curtains across the stage. He sounds completely annoyed.

I feel…I think I feel furious. Or hurt. Or tricked. Or something. Or like I should have known better. Like I did know better. No, I just feel stupid. And hurt. And I don't want to feel those things, so best to let them transform into anger.

Julian stands up from the piano. "What are you doing here?" he asks Tristan, and he genuinely sounds surprised to see him. The anger transmutation halts, waiting to hear what happens next.

Tristan swipes his hand into his hair and flips it to the side as he rolls his eyes and snidely retorts, "I'm always here. Why is *she*?"

My feet slowly carry me forward, like I'm one of those people on the sidewalk who sees a terrible accident happen and can't help but stop what I'm doing to go look at the damage.

“You weren’t here last week,” Julian replies, his tone even. “I invited Mia because I know she likes music.”

“I knew it had to be you taking up all his time,” Tristan sneers at me.

Julian rolls his eyes. “Mia isn’t taking up all of my time. You’re the one who’s been busy with tennis and trying to impress all the Key boys.”

“Yes, and I missed you,” Tristan retorts, somehow sounding both bored and wronged, “so I thought I’d come listen to you play and fuck you on top of the piano after telling you everything you did wrong. By the way, you hit G-sharp twice during the second movement, and you were off time coming into the third.”

“I was not,” Julian instantly replies.

“Fine,” Tristan concedes, “but you did hit the G-sharps.”

“Mia.” Julian turns to me, empathetic and kind, with sweat on his brow from the stage lights. “I really didn’t know that Tristan was going to be here. But since he is, can we all just talk?”

“No, we cannot just talk,” Tristan angrily replies, taking the words right out of my mouth. “I told you I don’t want her around. She’s a judgmental bitch who thinks she knows everything—”

“Judgmental bitch?” I cut him off, instantly enraged by this ridiculous accusation. “You said that I was just some non-wife-material plaything you were already planning to ditch. It’s not that my feelings are hurt or that I want to be wife material. It’s that I’m disgusted with you for being someone who fucks people for sport, and with myself for thinking you might have anything that vaguely resembles a good quality.

“And that is not me being a ‘judgmental bitch’! That is me calling you on your shit, which clearly, no one has ever done in your life, because you obviously can’t handle being rejected, even though anyone in their right mind would have done the same thing as me. Maybe that is judgment, but it

is sound judgment, not angry judgment, not hurt judgment, just pure logic. You are completely self-centered. You don't care about anyone but yourself, and you brag about using people. No rational person wants to be mixed up in that. Julian—"

I pause for breath and turn to Julian, who looks completely stunned by the vitriol that has just poured out of me. His wide, unreadable eyes poke a hole into whatever has swelled inside of me. "Julian…look, I like you. I really, really like you. But you are already in a relationship, no matter how unconventional or not exactly committed or whatever it may be.

"We never talked about it, and I didn't want to," I confess, "because I wanted to pretend that we could just be friends hanging out who happened to be attracted to each other. I wanted to pretend I didn't feel things for you. I wanted to pretend that whatever we were doing wasn't a lot like dating because then I'd have to think about all the complicated parts, and no matter how much I like you, I don't like Tristan. And I don't know what there is between you two, but I know that I can't trust him, which means I can't be a part of it. So I need to do what I've been utterly failing to do for a month, which is walk away from all of this. So, please, both of you, just leave me alone."

My heart is pounding, my legs are twisting, I'm pivoting on my heel, and I'm pointed toward the curtains. I dive into them, letting them cloak me, protect me from anything that might pull me back. I hear Julian call my name, but the door slams behind me and I'm headed…well I don't know and I don't care, as long as it's away from Julian and Tristan.

Part Four

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Tuesday

Time Until Tap Night:

3 Days

— Mia —

I have just fallen asleep when Leanne urgently shakes my shoulder, half whispering, half hissing, “Mia! Mia!”

“What?” I ask, bolting up, expecting something like an earthquake or fire.

“Tristan Masters,” she breathes, her voice dripping with the juice of anticipated drama, “is at the door.”

“What?” I ask again, this time confused.

“He’s asking for you,” she practically giggles.

“Oh God,” I moan, feeling a wave of nausea wash through me as my body begs me to return to the sleep I’d been stolen from. “Is he drunk?”

“I don’t know,” Leanne whispers, “but he said he wouldn’t go away until I got you.”

“That fucking asshat,” I mutter.

This time Leanne does giggle. “I’m telling you he has a thing for you.”

“Yes,” I sarcastically reply as I push my covers off and feel around in the dark for my pajama pants and sweatshirt. “Almost three years of antagonistic contempt is usually indicative of having a *thing* for someone.”

I pull my sweatshirt over my head, then realize it's backward, but since I'm hoping it will be back on my floor in less than five minutes I decide I don't care. Leanne follows me out, but stops behind the corner of the wall to eavesdrop. When I get into the common room of our suite, I can see Tristan's silhouette propped against my door frame, his shoulder holding the door open, his angelic hair hiding his face.

"What do you want?" I ask, trying to sound as gruff as I can.

"Mia," he whispers so quietly that I almost can't hear him.

"Are you drunk?" I ask, assuming the answer has to be yes.

He shakes his head and says something, but he is so quiet I can't hear him. Realizing I'd rather not ask him to speak up and have Leanne hear whatever he's going to say, I reluctantly make my way to within a foot of him.

"Are you drunk?" I repeat, craning my head, trying to see his face.

He weakly shakes his head. "I'm sick," he mutters, and, now that I'm this close, I can hear the awful wheezy rumble in his chest as he says it. I automatically pull the edge of my sweatshirt over my mouth so I don't breathe in his germs.

"Why are you here?" I hiss.

"I need you to—" His hand comes up to cover his face and a terrible cough wracks its way up his torso and out of his throat. It sounds painful. So painful that my lungs clench empathetically. I glance back over my shoulder at Leanne, who is now looking at us with alarm. *Fuck,* I think. *How am I going to explain this?*

I touch his shoulder and nudge him backward, out the door. With the hand that isn't covering his face he grabs onto my wrist. His grip is weak and needy, like that of a scared toddler.

Fuck, I internally groan, *pretty sure it's going to be more than five minutes before I get to go back to sleep.*

I very slowly and quietly pull the door closed behind us, so we are out in the hall now. His coughing fit seems to have ceased and now he's wheezing, quick and shallow, catching his breath. "You need me to take you to Health?" I guess.

Again he shakes his head, his sweat-drenched hair swaying from side to side. "Julian," he mutters and then with a great, terrible boom from his chest another coughing fit begins.

"Tristan," I mutter, more annoyed at this point that I feel bad for him than that he's woken me up, "I don't have a car. I can't take you to Julian. Did you call him?"

"Fucker isn't answering his phone," Tristan replies after several more seconds of coughing. "Please."

"Well, I can get an Uber for you." I sigh turning back to my door. "I just need to get my pho—"

"No," Tristan says, reaching out for me, weak and desperate, "please, Mia. I need you to take me."

"I told you I don't have a—"

He holds out his phone, as if the call list is supposed to mean something to me. "I called," he explains. "I can't leave alone. People are watching."

"People are watching?" I repeat. "Who is watching? What are they watching? Why does it make a difference if I go with you?"

"It just does, it's just—"

Whatever it *just is,* I don't find out because another coughing fit hits him. This one is so hard that he actually braces himself against the wall with his hands. When it lets up a little bit, I swoop his hair back with one

hand and place the other on the back of his neck. It is really, really hot, even drenched in sweat. I check his forehead too—just as warm.

"Damn it," I mutter. He really is sick. "You need to go to Health. You're—"

"No," he pleads, placing shaky hands on my shoulders. "Please just come with me. I—I just need help. They're watching."

His voice is so shaky and quiet, his eyes glassy but alert, he looks like he's half ready to pass out and half ready to bolt. What is wrong with him? Whatever it is, I don't want to catch it, so I dip and twist away from him.

"Who is—" I am cut off by his ringing phone.

He answers it and hisses, "Just wait," then hangs up.

He turns back to me and says, "Please," again. He really does look like he's going to pass out any minute.

"Why do you need my help? What about all the people you usually hang out with?"

"Because, you idiot," he wheezes, curling into his side in pain, "I can trust you."

"God damn it." I sigh, and then, because I'm a complete idiot, I shimmy my shoulder under his arm and help him down the hall.

We make it to the elevator before another coughing fit hits. It doesn't occur to me until we step out of Berkeley and into the pouring rain that I'm only wearing socks, but Tristan is practically doubled over coughing again so I can't really turn back now. Besides, I haven't had time to think of how I'm going to explain this to Leanne.

There is an expensive-looking black car at the edge of the sidewalk. Its door opens and a man in uniform steps out. He opens the largest umbrella I have ever seen and rushes toward us. I help Tristan over to the

car, and the man opens the back door. Tristan sort of falls in and I climb in after him, trying to get him to sit up.

The man closes the door behind me and gets in on the driver's side. He shifts into drive and I instantly say, "He's not buckled up."

Tristan actually starts to laugh in response to this, but the laugh quickly turns into a cringe as he curls even deeper into a ball. The driver keeps driving; I guess he knows where we're going. "Tristan, why did you need me to go with you?" I whisper. "Who do you think is watching?"

"Not yet," he whispers back, his eyes conspiratorially shifting to the driver.

"Are you on drugs?" I whisper. I really hope his answer is yes, because every illness I know of that makes a person feverish, delusional, and paranoid is potentially deadly.

"Only some," he mutters.

What does that mean? I think, but decide it's better not to ask. I'll tell Julian and let him deal with it.

I'm bent at an awkward angle with my arms half around Tristan, trying to get his seatbelt on him, but he isn't really sitting up, and he won't relinquish his grip across his stomach so my efforts are probably in vain. When we round a corner and I am thrust into the door behind me, I realize I've failed to put my own seatbelt on. Before I can catch myself, Tristan topples over too. His shaking torso is across my lap and he doesn't make any move to readjust himself, even though he can't possibly be comfortable. I push myself back up, but still he doesn't move.

I can hear his teeth chattering. He seems so little and weak. No matter how much I don't like him, right now he really doesn't seem like anything more than a sick child in a man's body. I pull his hair back and feel his forehead again. It might be my imagination, but it seems even hotter than it was ten minutes ago.

“We really should go to the hospital,” I whisper. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise, but I think you might need serious help.”

“No,” he stubbornly mutters through chattering teeth. I let out a deep breath and wonder if I should make the driver go anyway.

As I stare out at the dark streets, made hazy by rain and fog, my fingers start to slowly weave through the hair I’ve pushed back. When they reach the end of the strands, they find Tristan’s scalp and begin their slow comb all over again, then again, and again. When I realize this is happening, I almost stop, but I notice his breathing has gone smooth and decide against it. He really is just an overgrown little kid.

The driver comes to a stop not long after we turn down Church Street. He steps out to open the door and I get out first so I can help Tristan. He crawls out after me and immediately heads for a set of resplendent doors, sort of dragging me along with him. I am about to protest that I got him here and now I’m going back, but my feet are absolutely freezing in the wet socks, and I still haven’t thought of what I’m going to tell Leanne.

As Tristan punches in the code to get into the building I call back to the driver, “Will you wait?”

“I wait ten minute,” he replies in a heavy Russian accent.

I’ll just go up with him and borrow some socks and shoes, I think. Julian being who he is, I’m sure he’ll let me. I glance back at the driver, who remains standing solemnly outside of the car, massive umbrella held tight.

We walk into a lobby that is extremely fancy. If there were a reception desk instead of mailboxes I’d assume this was a really nice hotel. It’s way too fancy-looking for someone who is in grad school and drives a Prius.

Tristan pulls us toward the elevator. Inside, he mutters, “Seven,” which I assume indicates the button I am supposed to press. Another

coughing fit hits, and continues as we make our way out of the elevator and down the hall; I feel bad for all the people trying to sleep.

Tristan stops in front of apartment 707 and with shaky hands pulls out a single key and unlocks the door. Inside, there is warm lamp light coming from around the wall. The door closes behind us. Tristan leans against the wall and slides down it, until he is a balled-up, sweat-drenched heap.

“Julian?” I call, assuming that if Tristan wanted to be here then Julian must not have roommates.

“Mia?” Julian’s startled voice calls back as feet hit the floor. In seconds he is in front of us, wearing gray lounge pants, a white T-shirt, and glasses. His eyes shift from me to Tristan and the smile in them fades as a serious frown grows.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“He’s sick, or on drugs, or both,” I answer. “He showed up at my room and insisted I bring him here.”

Julian crouches down beside Tristan and checks his neck and forehead just like I did. “How long have you been like this, Tristan?” Julian asks.

“I don’t know. Hours,” Tristan answers through chattering teeth.

“Have you taken your temperature?” Julian asks, calm but serious, like a doctor.

“No.” Tristan wraps his arms around his knees, pulling them to his chest. “C-cold.”

“Mia.” Julian turns to me. “Across the living room to the left is my bedroom, inside is a bathroom, in the top drawer to the left of the sink there should be a thermometer. Will you get it, please? Also, get the blanket off the bed.”

I instantly do what he says. Something about the quiet, serious urgency combined with his clinical calm makes me wonder if whatever is going on is more serious than just a fever. Does Tristan have some sort of chronic condition he's managed to keep hidden from everyone in Berkeley?

My feet squish across the carpet as I go, and I stop just long enough to sluice my socks off. Peripherally, I take in little bits of data—how nice Julian's apartment is, the packed-to-the-brim built-in bookshelves that go all the way to the ceiling, the immaculate modern furniture, the huge paintings on the walls. I don't really look at any of them, but I see all of them.

Julian's bed is made, his bathroom towels hang at exact even lengths, his drawer has a sorter inside of it, and the thermometer is easy to find because it has its own slot. I drop my wet socks in the sink, grab the thermometer, then yank the blanket off the bed, letting pillows fall to the floor in its wake. When I get back out to the living room, Julian has Tristan's arm over his shoulder, and he is half dragging him to the couch.

"Thanks, Mia," Julian says, lowering Tristan onto the couch. He takes the thermometer from me and holds it out in front of Tristan, who opens his mouth and closes his eyes. His head lolls back so his chin and the thermometer are pointed at the ceiling. With his hair pushed out of his face, the puffy red circles around his eyes are more apparent. Julian wordlessly takes the blanket from me and drapes it over Tristan.

We stand in silence until the thermometer beeps. Julian pulls it from Tristan's lips. He reads it and his frown deepens.

"What is it?" I ask, automatically curious.

"103.4," Julian quickly replies. "Tristan, what did you take?"

"Whitecaps. A lot," Tristan half whispers, half moans. "Then phenibut."

"Why would you do that?" Julian groans in exasperation. Before Tristan can even answer though, he spins around, disappears behind a wall,

and reappears holding his cellphone.

I don’t know what whitecaps or phenibut are, but I do know that 103.4° is a very, very high temperature. Without thinking twice, I find the kitchen and open the freezer. No frozen vegetables. No ice packs. But there is ice. I pull it out and start opening drawers until I find ziplock bags.

By the time I’m back, Julian is talking on the phone to someone. I walk behind the couch and gently tilt Tristan’s head up. His eyes flutter open to meet mine. They are so red and exhausted that my own eyes fill with empathetic tears.

“I’m going to put an ice pack on the back of your neck,” I tell him in a voice that belongs to my mother. “Your brain needs to remain at a lower temperature to properly regulate your body’s functions.”

He blinks slowly, and I take that as assent. His teeth clench when the cold hits his skin, but he quickly eases back into it. Soon his head is completely limp again.

“Yes, yes,” Julian says. “No,” then, “Okay, thank you.” He hangs the phone up.

“Bailer is on his way,” Julian says to Tristan, who replies with another tiny blink.

“Who is Bailer?”

“Dr. Maqsud. He’s a private physician,” Julian explains. “He only makes house calls. We call him Bailer because most of his business is bailing people out of recreational drug-use mistakes. Which is what this is.”

“So you’re not sick? Like contagious-germ sick?” I ask Tristan. No detectable response whatsoever.

“He’s not,” Julian says, “he’s just stupid. Seriously, Tristan, what were you thinking? Why would you do that, only three days before—”

“Exactly, three days,” Tristan mutters without opening his eyes, “to be clean.”

“To be clean?” Julian repeats, dumbfounded. “You mean for the ceremony?”

“Yeah,” Tristan sort of whistles.

“You’re so—” Julian takes in a deep breath instead of finishing his sentence, then exhales hard. He turns away from Tristan toward me. “Mia, thank you for bringing him. I’m really sorry for all of this—I know you have class tomorrow, there’s no reason for you to be any more put out. I’ll call a car for you. Sleep in,” he adds with a smile I detect no small amount of worry in, “I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to cancel my discussion classes tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t have shoes,” I respond. I think I meant to say there’s already a car, or my socks are wet.

“You can borrow some,” he instantly offers, just like I thought he would.

I’m pretty sure I mean to say yes, or thank you, but instead I say, “The car is probably gone already.”

“I’ll call a new one,” he says. “Let me get you shoes.”

He’s into his room and back in only a few seconds. The shoes he carries are very fancy-looking rain boots. He offers them to me along with thick wool-blend socks. I sit down in the armchair and pull the socks on, then the first boot, which seems gigantic, but then...

Julian is kneeling in front of Tristan, gently feeling his forehead. There is tenderness in his touch. He really is worried about Tristan, and I…

I don’t know what I am. Tired, of course, but that’s just a peripheral feeling, pushed to the back by the strangeness of this situation. This whole

thing feels surreal. I feel like I'm suspended in time and space, unable to move, unable to look away, stuck observing.

"What did he mean?" I ask, instead of putting on the second boot. "That he had to be clean?"

"Key has a ceremonial cleansing that involves a guided ayahuasca trip," Julian explains with a disapproving frown. "He was trying to preemptively clean his psyche out so that nothing major would come out in front of the Brotherhood." Turning back to Tristan, he adds, "Which I told you was a stupid idea."

Tristan's eyes halfway open and I can see that spark of conspiratorial panic flare to life in them. "Sssssshhhhhh," he hisses with absolutely no oomph behind it. He even tries to sit up, but ends up just rolling onto his side, face-first into the couch cushion.

Julian slips his arms under Tristan's torso and maneuvers him back around. What drugs must Tristan have taken to end up in this state?

"Hand me a pillow?" Julian asks me.

I pull out the one behind me. Julian stuffs it under Tristan's head, then grabs his legs and swings them up onto the couch. He grabs my ice pack and slips it back under Tristan's neck too. It's half melted already.

I find myself pulling off the one boot I have on, and then hurrying to the kitchen for more ice. When I get back, Julian again has his phone to his ear. I hold out the new ice pack to him just as he says, "Hello? Yes, my name is Julian Roth. I'd like to request a private car for one passenger—"

Again, the sensation of being a suspended observer, helplessly watching events unfold before me, occurs. Some being that is me, but is not me, reaches out and slips the phone right out of Julian's hand, then taps the end-call button. Julian looks up at me in confusion.

My head shakes and for some reason my mouth says, "I'll stay for now. Until the doctor says he's okay." I know drug trips can't be

contagious, but I really feel like I must have caught this one.

Julian gives me a grateful smile. “Well then, are you hungry?” he asks. “I can whip up something really quick while we wait.”

“Sure.” I nod and give him a little smile back. He stands and heads off to the kitchen. As I watch him walk away, I notice that his hands are shaking. I get the feeling he is cooking more to stay busy than to be hospitable. He must be much more worried or upset than he is letting on.

I sidestep, intending to go back to my chair, but Tristan’s arm flops into my path, and he makes a motion as if to grab me, but he can’t find the strength in his hands. I stop and look down at him. His eyes are barely open but I can tell he’s looking at me.

“I feel calmer with you,” he whispers.

Other than seeing Azzi stoned, I have pretty much no experience with drugs or people on drugs, and stoned Azzi is just extra inclined to giggle and say whatever pops into her head, which is not that different than not-stoned Azzi. Certainly, that is nothing like this.

I know that supposedly people can imagine and experience really bad illusions and delusions on drugs. I can’t imagine what horrors a spoiled kid like Tristan could conjure up, but obviously he’s managed to mess himself up pretty bad. And all because he wants to join a club of people he doesn’t want to accidentally say something embarrassing in front of? It’s kind of sad, really.

So the same part of me that got the ice pack and took off the boots wordlessly slips my hands behind his head and helps him sit up. I pull the pillow out from beneath him and sit where it used to be. He collapses back onto my lap with a little sigh of relief.

I can hear light noises coming from the kitchen—glass clinking against metal, a drawer opening and closing, then a cupboard. I focus on those sounds because there are no other sounds besides Tristan’s shallow breaths. I keep waiting for a coughing fit, but it doesn’t come.

I look around the room more thoroughly now. I see that the art is not Abstract, as I initially thought when rushing to the bedroom, but Surreal. I notice a mother-of-pearl standing globe I'd entirely overlooked before. I even spot a box of chocolates stashed in a basket underneath several magazines. The top magazine is a cooking magazine and has a picture of a rare steak on it. My stomach rumbles to life at the sight of it. I am so glad Julian is making food—I don't really care what it is.

My fingers find their way back to Tristan's hair, just as they did in the car, and, just like in the car, they slowly comb through his platinum locks. It gives them something to do, which is a pathological calming tendency of mine, and it seems to feel good for Tristan too. Maybe that's what he wanted when he said I make him calmer.

"Tristan," I whisper, "why did you need me to bring you here?"

"Trust you," he answers, his face more peaceful than I've seen it all night.

"Why do you trust me?" I gently ask, careful not to break the rhythm of my strokes.

"You're good," he mutters.

"What do you—"

DING!

There is a tiny crashing noise in the kitchen, and then Julian practically flies around the corner and out of sight to answer the door. *The doctor sure got here fast,* I think. But maybe he didn't. Maybe my perception of time is off because it's nearly four a.m. and I'm tired and I'm babysitting a drugged-out boy who, until a month ago, I avoided interacting with whenever possible. Seems like a distorted reality to me.

The door opens and words loud enough for me to hear but too quiet for me to understand are exchanged. Then Julian comes back into the living room, followed by a middle-aged Middle Eastern man wearing a sweat suit.

He carries two large cases; one is rectangular, like a really big toolbox, and the other is circular. He looks at me and Tristan, then places the cases on the coffee table.

“Mr. Smith, I am Dr. Maqsud. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Tristan opens his mouth but a cough comes out instead of an answer.

“I take that as yes. You are girlfriend, correct?” he asks me, but doesn’t wait for an answer. “Do you know exactly how much he took of each substance?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, figuring that it doesn’t actually matter who he thinks I am.

“Wonderful, very helpful,” he sarcastically rumbles. “Has he lost consciousness at all?”

“Not that I know of.”

This whole thing is so weird. What am I doing here? Why did I stay? Is this just some morbid fascination with watching a real-life disaster unfold in front of me? Am I being like one of those people who can’t help but stop and watch as the bodies get pulled from a flipped-over car on the side of the freeway?

The doctor turns to Julian and says, “I need an electric outlet.”

Julian instantly pushes the armchair aside and pulls out whatever was plugged in.

The doctor turns back to the coffee table. I get a front row view as he opens the toolbox and pulls out tray after tray of different medical equipment—including several different-sized needles and syringes, and at least a hundred pill bottles. The other case is made of thick white leather and is zipped up around the top. He opens it very carefully and pulls out a machine that looks a bit like a bunt-cake pan.

Once the machine is settled on the table and plugged in, the doctor turns around, crouching next to us, and pulls his stethoscope out. He checks Tristan's heartbeat, his breathing in several different spots, and then asks him to open his eyes and mouth. When Tristan is able to do both, at least partially, the doctor sort of smiles and says, "This is a good sign."

He turns back to the coffee table, opens a packet of sterile cloth, lays it out, and then he rips a needle out of its package, hooks it to a collection tube, and places it on a fresh cloth. "Mr. Smith, I'm going to draw some blood from you. Do you consent?"

"Ye—yeah," Tristan wheezes from my lap.

Dr. Maqsud yanks up his sleeve then ties a rubber tourniquet above Tristan's elbow. After a few quick pokes, he retrieves his prepped needle from the table. I wince watching the needle go in, but Tristan doesn't even flinch.

When the collection tube is full, Dr. Maqsud disconnects it, but leaves the needle in Tristan's arm and tapes it into place. I clench my jaw. I hate needles. I absolutely hate needles. Tristan must be really messed up to not even care that that thing is in his arm.

Dr. Maqsud places the vial of blood into a slot at the interior edge of the bunt-cake machine, closes the lid, and turns it on. The machine spins around and around, faster and faster. Dr. Maqsud and Julian stare intently at it.

"What is it doing?" I ask.

"It will break down his blood into chemical components and give me a read of them and their percentages, from this I will know what is in his system and how much. From there, I treat."

Of course, it's a centrifuge—I had to use one in my freshman bio class. I feel dumb for not recognizing it sooner. Another thing I'll let my ego blame on lack of sleep.

“How long will it take?” Julian asks, watching it like a hawk.

The doctor shrugs nonchalantly. “Eh, ten minutes. He will not die.”

Julian says nothing and does not look away. His foot begins to tap erratically.

“Julian?” I softly say. “Will you make some coffee?”

His eyes snap to mine and a cloak of calm descends upon them with impressive speed, but I saw the fear and frustration first. Yes, giving him something to do is a good idea.

“I don’t have coffee,” he responds.

“Tea then? Anything with caffeine. Please?”

His jaw clenches and he glances from me to the machine and back, but finally he gives a curt little nod before once again disappearing into the kitchen.

“You are unusually calm for the girlfriend,” Dr. Maqsud remarks. “Are you on drugs too?”

“No,” I instantly reply. “I’m just really tired.”

“Me too. But hey, idiots like your boyfriend here are how I make my living, and they are usually idiots in the middle of night. I am used to it.”

I crack a smile. “Why do you keep calling him Mr. Smith?”

“All these kinds of patients are either Mr. or Mrs. Smith,” Dr. Maqsud replies. “They call me because they don’t want anyone to know how dumb they are. I get paid well to not ask names.”

“Is that legal?” I ask, but before Dr. Maqsud can answer, if he was even going to, Tristan’s body tenses against my legs, and another terrible cough erupts from him. He jerks and curls onto his side. I have to grab him at the hip and shoulder to keep him from rolling off the couch entirely.

I keep waiting for the coughing fit to end, or at least die down, but it only seems to be getting worse. I look at the doctor, who is watching him carefully, but does not seem concerned. After a full minute of this, Dr. Maqsud turns back to his kit and slips several little test tubes into a stand, then he pulls out tiny bottles and pours one of each into each of the test tubes.

Tristan's coughs finally subside; there is now a puddle of drool soaking through my pajama pants and onto my knee. Tristan flips himself back over, so he's face up. He weakly grabs my hand and drops it onto his face. "Hair," he whispers, his voice thin and raspy.

I go back to combing his hair again and slowly his muscles relax. His eyes slide shut immediately, so I just stare at his face. It's weird to see someone you've technically known for years in a state like this. Looking at him—his eyes puffy and red again, his lips both swollen and cracked from coughing, his cheeks pale, his brow drenched in cold sweat—I realize I've never actually looked at him at all. Even after we had sex I never really looked at him. Until this moment I've never really seen him.

Dr. Maqsud turns back around with a handful of long, one-ended cotton swabs. One after the other, he swipes the back of Tristan's throat with them and places one in each of the test tubes, letting them soak in their liquid. In the sixth vial, the previously clear liquid turns blue.

"That is what I thought," Dr. Maqsud mumbles to himself. "Well," he says to me, much louder, "the coughing is an allergic reaction, most likely to fungus on the magic mushrooms. I can give him steroid and it will go away."

"Yes," Tristan groans weakly, "steroid."

"Not until after blood test. I need to see results."

The centrifuge's quick hum slows and the spinning gradually comes to a stop. Almost instantly Julian reappears carrying a tray with four mugs and a teakettle, making me wonder if he somehow heard it slowing down

from the kitchen. He puts the tea tray on the displaced armchair and pours tea into one cup, which he passes to me.

“Tea, Doctor?” Julian offers, his impatient eyes fixed on the centrifuge.

“Do you have marmalade?” Dr. Maqsud asks.

“No,” Julian answers, politely stifling a confused frown.

“Then I will wait,” Dr. Maqsud says.

Out of the bottom of the centrifuge a little piece of paper emerges, like a receipt. A long receipt. Dr. Maqsud snatches it up and quickly reads it. I watch Julian watch him. He remains poised in an impressive veneer of calm, but I see his heel twitch several times.

“Okay, so, Mr. Smith, you take a lot of mushrooms and then you have bad trip and take phenibut to try to combat bad trip, right?” Dr. Maqsud says. “You take too much phenibut—this is powerful and dangerous stuff. You are terrible at chemistry, do not try to be chemist again.

“Your mushrooms had a fungus on them, that is why you are coughing. Get new dealer. Fungus will take at least twenty-four hours to clear your lungs, I leave pills for this. You do not take until noon tomorrow. For now, I give you steroid so coughing stops. Based on amount of psilocybin in blood, mushroom trip will be over in the next six to eight hours. I advise sleeping it off. I can give you shot for that too.”

“Steroid,” Tristan croaks as another round of coughs wracks his body.

“So, he’s going to be fine with the steroid?” Julian asks. “He’s not in any danger from the drug interactions? What about the fever?”

“Fever is because of mushrooms, fever is so high because of bad interaction with phenibut. Steroid will help with that too. So, Mr. Smith…”

He turns back to Tristan. “You want steroid and sleep aid? Or just steroid?”

“Steroid,” Tristan repeats, his teeth gritting as if in pain.

He rolls back over onto his side. I think I’ve lost the feeling in my legs, but I am fixated on Dr. Maqsud filling up another syringe and connecting it to the needle in Tristan’s arm. No wonder he didn’t want me to take him to Health. He’d get suspended, maybe even expelled, if the university knew about this.

Dr. Maqsud pulls the needle out of Tristan’s arm and disposes of it in a portable biohazard bag. He repacks his toolbox and his centrifuge, then takes the tea tray off the armchair and places it on the coffee table. He pours himself a cup and settles into the now empty chair. “I will wait thirty minutes to make sure steroid is working right,” he explains. “Do you have honey?”

Julian is instantly off to get it.

“I thought you only wanted tea with marmalade?” I say because I’m willing to say anything rather than have him just sit there and stare at me.

He shrugs. “Honey not as good as marmalade, but I make do.”

Julian reappears carrying a half-empty honey bear. He hands it to Dr. Maqsud then crouches down next to Tristan. Our eyes catch. I can tell he wants to touch Tristan the way that you can’t help but want to touch people you care about when they’re hurt or sick, but he’s holding himself back because Dr. Maqsud is watching.

It is a long thirty minutes, during which Dr. Maqsud checks Tristan’s temperature, heartbeat, breathing, and looks inside his mouth and ears three times. Each time, he reports that Tristan’s temperature is dropping and everything looks good. Julian’s nervous foot-tapping slows with each good report. By the time Dr. Maqsud stands up to leave, Tristan’s temperature is down to 102.1, and it’s been over twenty minutes since he coughed.

“He should exhibit normal symptoms of psilocybin ingestion in about an hour, once the steroid is in full effect,” Dr. Maqsud tells us as he finishes his third cup of tea. “If his fever goes up instead of down, call 911. As long as it gets down to 101, you don’t need to worry, but call me again if it’s not completely gone by nine tomorrow morning.”

Julian nods. “Thank you,” he says, then, “just a minute,” and he disappears into the bedroom. He re-emerges carrying a thickly packed letter-sized envelope. He hands it to Dr. Maqsud, who opens it and looks inside, but does not pull the contents out. I don’t have to see it to know it must be a hefty amount of cash.

“Good doing business.” Dr. Maqsud holds out his hand and Julian shakes it. He then pulls a business card out of his shirt pocket and hands it to me. “So that next time he does something stupid you don’t have to bring him to your brother,” he explains.

I take it with a tired smile, really not sure what to say to that. Did Julian tell him he was my brother? Or is he just guessing because Tristan and Julian don’t look at all related?

Dr. Maqsud grabs his centrifuge and his toolbox and Julian walks him to the door. I stare at the tea tray on the coffee table and realize that this whole time—even when I took Dr. Maqsud’s card—I haven’t stopped combing Tristan’s hair.

Julian reappears and crouches down beside us. “Tristan,” he says, somehow sounding both gentle and frustrated, “I’m going to help you to the bed, okay?”

Tristan takes a long, deep breath and sort of rolls over, so his knees hit the floor. Julian is behind him in a flash, catching his waist between his knees and hoisting him up, under the arms. Julian and Tristan are about the same size, but Julian doesn’t seem to be straining as he literally pulls Tristan to his feet.

Slowly they make their way into the bedroom. I watch until they are through the doorway, and then my eyes wander until they land on Julian’s

blanket, crumpled up on the floor. I pick it up and walk over to the bedroom, figuring it will be needed in there.

Julian has Tristan on the bed and is already pulling off his shoes. I wait until both are off before slowly walking up and holding out the blanket. Julian takes it and unfurls it, but hands me a corner. Wordlessly, we spread it across Tristan.

“We will be in the living room. I’m going to leave the door open so you can call if you need me,” Julian gently tells Tristan, who grunts in response.

I walk out and peruse the bookshelf as I wait, mostly because it’s better to be staring at something than it is to be staring at nothing. I pull out a book written in a language I don’t recognize—it looks like it might be Cyrillic. By the time Julian comes out, I’ve settled on the couch and am mindlessly flipping through the mystery book.

“Your tea must be cold by now,” Julian says, sitting down on the couch a familiar but polite distance away.

“I don’t mind cold tea,” I reply, gently closing the book. “Anyway, I suppose this is the part where I do actually really borrow your boots and go home and try to think up some explanation to give my roommate about why I disappeared in the middle of the night without shoes.”

“If that is what you’d like.” Julian smiles, kind, amused, exhausted, frazzled, and relieved all at once. “If you’d like to stay a bit longer, I did finish making chocolate-chip pancake batter just before the Bailer got here. I could have pancakes in front of you in ten minutes or less.”

That’s right, my stomach rumbles back to life, *food.* “I suppose,” I respond with a tired, loaded smile of my own, “that another ten minutes or so really doesn’t matter at this point.”

—

While the pancakes cook I sit at the kitchen table, which is dark wood, cut sharp, elegant, and modern, and read a cookbook that is all about how to cook without using technology that is less than five hundred years old. I've just gotten to a bit about how in ancient Norway different types of straw were used for controlling the heat of a cooking fire, when the soft clink of ceramic announces that pancakes have been served. I instantly put the book down and joyfully take the fork that has been sitting beside me waiting for action.

Julian returns a moment later with a steaming plate and fork of his own and sits in the chair nearest to me.

"So," I say, breaking the silence before it can become awkward, "Key makes you take ayahuasca during the initiation ceremony?"

"Well…" Julian smiles wryly. "I'm not a Keyman, but from what I heard growing up, yes."

"Growing up?"

"My father is. He was very mad at me for declining the invitation when I was tapped. He threatened to cut me off and everything."

I look pointedly around the apartment. "But he didn't."

Julian shrugs. "My mother counter-threatened to file for divorce and take half of his money with her. She's had ample evidence of his affairs for years and he knows it, so it stands to reason she'd make out well in the settlement."

"Why didn't you join? Almost everyone I know secretly wants to be tapped, especially by Key."

"Yes, because they believe in the prestige and the connections that supposedly set up your entire future for you. It's true, they do…but it comes at a cost. I don't know if this is true of all secret societies, but Key has a long-stretching agenda that goes beyond Yale, and its members are expected to do whatever is necessary to support that agenda for the rest of their lives.

That is why they set you up so nicely—so that when you're called upon, you're well placed to do whatever you're asked."

"So Tristan wants to be tied to these people forever, but doesn't want them to hear whatever he might say on ayahuasca? Seems sort of—"

"Dumb?" Julian finishes for me. "It is. I've tried to tell him that it's not worth it, but he's stubborn and set on it, whatever hell it may bring into his life. I can't believe he did this though. I mean, he's done 'shrooms several times, he should have known that the solution to a bad trip was not over-the-counter psychoactive pharmaceuticals. And a fungus? I'm going to call Jesse about this fungus. Actually I should tell him now before he sells to anyone else. Do you mind?" he asks, ever the gentleman.

With my cheeks so stuffed with pancake that they jiggle, I shake my head no. He goes into the living room for his phone. I swallow my pancakes and get up to help myself to a glass of water.

Julian's cupboards have glass panes, which is very helpful in this endeavor. I find bottled water in the fridge beside a half-eaten Oreo cheesecake. If I hadn't just stuffed two pancakes down my throat in less than five minutes, I'd definitely want to eat that cake.

"Sorry," Julian says, slipping his phone into his pocket as he reenters the kitchen. "Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"Tristan, Keymen, you think he shouldn't join, he won't listen, ayahuasca, and he's an idiot for mixing drugs."

"Yes, that." He sighs. "I'm so sorry you've gotten dragged into this, Mia. The blackmail thing was stupid in the first place and I never should have gone along with it. The truth is, I find you very attractive and I have since we met, but you're technically my student and, of course, I'm not exactly available, in the conventional sense anyway. I just…I'm just sorry for how everything happened, but I am not sorry I got to know you better. In fact, I'd still really like to know you more. I wish things were different."

His shoulders are so tense they're hunched, which I've never seen on Julian. He looks down as he talks, but his eyes are wide. His chest is deflated, defeated. I get the feeling the truth is gushing out of him right now because the stress and worry he's feeling have burst a hole in a dam and he can't stop the flood.

Something warm and simple gushes through my body, filling me with a level of empathetic understanding that infects me right down to the tips of my toes. "You really love him, don't you?"

"I do." Julian smiles, a fond but heavy smile.

"Do you think he feels the same way?" I ask.

"I think he loves me just as much," Julian answers. "He simply isn't as good at loving as I am, so it doesn't look like he does."

I stuff another wad of pancakes into my mouth and think about this statement for a moment. As soon as I swallow, I plan to ask more questions along these lines, but the chance is stolen from me by a heavy groan from the living room. Both Julian and I turn in our chairs and stand, though he is quite a bit faster about it than I am.

"Turn off the lights," Tristan says in a far-away sounding voice. It is very different than the strained wheezing of earlier. The doctor did say that in about an hour the steroid should have taken full effect. Guess it did.

Julian flips off the lights in the living room and then comes into the kitchen and turns off the chandelier and overhead light. Only the light above the stove remains on. Tristan follows him but stops right in the middle of the kitchen and sits down, his legs folded and his back straight.

"Julian?" he says, his voice somehow both detached and vulnerable. "Do you think they know?"

"No," Julian answers right away.

"What are you doing?" I ask Tristan.

“Sitting,” he replies serenely.

“How do you feel?” Julian asks, reclaiming his abandoned chair.

“Weird,” Tristan answers. Seconds of silence tick by. Tristan just stares into space as Julian and I stare at him.

“Do you want pancakes?” I ask, feeling rude about eating mine when he doesn’t have any.

“Why are you here?” Tristan responds.

“You woke me up in the middle of the night and made me bring you here,” I wryly reply.

“I didn’t make you,” he passively comments.

“Really?” I snort. “I’m pretty sure—”

“Don’t,” Julian quietly cuts me off, “he’s on a trip right now, there’s no point.”

“I can understand you, you know?” Tristan says, craning his head and body in an awkward-looking twist. “I know things. And”—he twists so his whole body and head are pointed at me now—“I know that I didn’t make you do anything. You wanted to come. You wanted to know what was waiting on the other side.”

“No,” I correct him, “I wanted to sleep, but because I’m not a completely heartless person and I thought you were really sick, rather than just on drugs, I helped you.”

“You want to take the proverbial road less traveled but you’re afraid to.” Tristan grins; his dilated pupils glitter with hints of mania. “You’re afraid. Why are you such an afraid person, Mia Winters?”

I look from him to Julian, who holds his finger up to his lips and shakes his head, telling me not to talk.

“Don’t do that, Julian,” Tristan says. “You’re afraid too, afraid I will scare her off, but I won’t. I’ll scare her closer.”

I look at Julian again, really not sure how I’m supposed to take this, but he is swiftly scribbling on a piece of paper, so I turn back to Tristan who is looking at me but seems to be talking to Julian.

“She wants to be afraid,” he whispers with dark glee. “She’s attracted to fear, otherwise she wouldn’t carry it around with her everywhere. You’ve read all of her articles in the *Daily*. You know. It dances at the outskirts of her every move and word because she’s flirting with it. Flirting with fear. And I am fear personified.”

“Tristan,” Julian says, drawing Tristan’s attention away from me while he surreptitiously slides the notepad across the table to me, “what are you afraid you would say or do during the ayahuasca initiation?”

“The truth.” Tristan hums and closes his eyes. I squint mine and, after a few seconds, manage to make out Julian’s note: *Don’t take anything he says personally, it’s all projection. Let me lead him through the trip.*

“Which truths?” Julian quietly asks. His voice is again clinical and calm, like that of a seasoned psychologist. I wonder how many times the two of them have done this.

“Us, Father, all the things I don’t even know that might come out. There is everything to be afraid of.”

“That is because you are attached to a certain perception of yourself by others,” Julian comments. “What is the root of that attachment?”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me. I don’t want to know the answer to any questions. If I can’t see the answers then I can’t accidentally show them to others.”

“You took the ’shrooms to clean yourself out, right? So that the secrets you want to keep wouldn’t be targeted by the ayahuasca? You have to explore them in order to be free of them.”

“I am exploring them,” Tristan says, a hint of the drawl I’m so familiar with buried deep beneath the twisted mystic whispers.

“Do you think that Skeleton Key won’t accept you if they know you’re bi?” I ask, too tired to be subtle or play beat-around-the-bush games. I get that Julian is trying to coax Tristan’s subconscious and his conscious into meeting, but coaxing could take forever. “Is that who you were really afraid of me showing the video of you and Julian to?”

“Not now,” Tristan replies.

“Because you have blackmail on me?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the worst thing that could possibly happen if you don’t get tapped by the Keys? Is your family going to cut you out of the will or something?”

Tristan turns his whole body toward me as his face twists into the most earnest honest frown, his eyes so poignantly open even under his angry brow. The veil of disinterest and superiority has lifted; I think he is actually showing his true feelings on his face.

“Among other things,” he answers darkly. “Things you’re too ignorant to know you’re lucky not to have to know.”

I purse my lips and remind myself of what Julian’s note said—*projection.* “Please,” I say, trying to curb my sarcasm, “enlighten me.”

“You’re such a know-it-all bitch,” he says observantly, without venom, almost amused. “You think you know things about me, you sound so judgmental, on your high horse, thinking you’d never be on drugs or care about joining a club, or whatever else you think about me. But I bet you grew up in a happy little run-down shack with a mommy and daddy who loved you unconditionally and have been proud of everything you’ve ever done. My parents don’t love; they invest. And when an investment is determined to be more of a loss than a gain, it gets dropped. I have to

always be a worthwhile investment. There is no security for me. There is no love. Love is for people who are poor and stupid, with no ambition. So go ahead and act like you're better than me because you have no reason to care what other people think. I do."

I wish he'd said it with venom. I wish that he was being a nasty bastard like he usually is. But he isn't. The hints of his facade are there, but they are impotent in this state, the truth easily shines through. I can see to the root of his hardness. I can see the fracture lines, marking the path that took him away from the innocence we're all born with and led instead to the angry, alone adult he has become.

"It was a mistake trusting you," he says, something raw bubbling up in his voice. "You can't actually understand."

Hurt. That's it. That's what he didn't want the Keymen to see. Deep underneath his hard exterior there is part of him that is still hurt. Hurt means an open wound. It means vulnerable. He's afraid they will see where he is vulnerable, and think him weak for it.

He stands on shaky legs and takes step after step out of the kitchen. Julian remains still and silent. An instinct I didn't really know I had takes me over and I follow him.

I reach out for his hand and catch it right as he crosses into the living room. He freezes at my touch, but doesn't turn around or say anything. I gently press my head against his back. His muscles tense, but he doesn't move away. So I slowly wind my arms under his and pull us close, like somehow, just the closeness could soothe him. Or maybe I'm the one projecting now, and I'm doing it to soothe myself.

His whole body seems to melt and then go tense and melt again. He doesn't try to step away, nor does he turn around. I, too, am frozen. I feel my heartbeat thud against his spine, and I think maybe I can somehow feel his heart beat back. I am wrong though, eventually what I think is a heartbeat becomes stronger and more erratic. It originates in his lower ribs, not his chest, and it is jerky.

“Tristan…” *Are you crying?* is what I’m thinking, but I know that’s the wrong thing to say. I am again filled with that bizarre sensation of being the third party observer, watching someone inhabit my body and react to Tristan in a way I never thought I would. “You’re right,” I whisper, “I don’t really know you, but that’s only because you’re such an asshole all the time, not because I’m not willing to know you. I can’t know things about you if you don’t tell me, and you can tell me. I will listen. I won’t make fun of you or use what you say to hurt you. I don’t want anything from you. You don’t have to earn anything.”

Thump, thump, thump, goes my heart.

I can feel Julian’s eyes on us, I can feel his calm. It’s almost like he is helping to create and hold this place. Like it is safer to be this version of me with Julian here, like she knows how to exist better with him watching. I can’t tell if she is wiser or more foolish than I usually am, but I know I want to learn more about her. It seems I’ve consented to “find out what’s on the other side,” as Tristan put it.

Tristan doesn’t respond with words. His elbows slowly move apart, breaking contact with my arms. His hands move inward and fall over mine. Gently, he pulls my hands away from his body and steps forward. I let out a deep breath and feel…sad, disappointed, something…Whatever just happened, and I don’t even know what it is, he’s going to walk away.

I let my hands drop back to my sides and shift my eyes to Julian, like maybe he will know how to say whatever I don’t. But then hands slide over my waist and around my back. I turn my head and Tristan’s lips push onto mine. I push back automatically.

This kiss is different than the few kisses we’ve shared before. It is slow and deep. I can feel every square millimeter of my lips meld into his. I can feel every tiny drop of pressure as they add up and turn me into a puddle of compassion.

I wrap my arms around his neck and wind my fingers into his hair, as I have before, but this time I feel tender and soft. This time, I run my fingers slow and strong up his neck and over his head, like I might push

away the invisible demons that eat at him. This time, I press my body into the contours of his and I don't feel reluctantly consumed by lust, instead I willingly surrender to the instinct to protect and heal.

He pulls away just enough to come back, to meld our lips together again, to re-create the tender, intimate something that I'm pretty sure he would run away from sober.

Why am I doing this, surrendering to the flow of this moment, when I really do know better? Why did I that day in the philosophy lounge, or when they cornered me in the piano-practicing room? Maybe Tristan is right…maybe part of me does just want to see what happens on the other side.

This is not like those days, though. This is not because I saw them practically already having sex and accidentally found myself turned on. Or because I couldn't get it out of my head afterward, and I was curious and confused and intrigued and thought one more time might answer a question I didn't exactly know how to ask. Or because I'm drunk.

This time, I'm much more aware of the full reality of what it means to kiss Tristan in Julian's apartment at five a.m.—emotionally, mentally, physically. This time, I'm sober in more ways than one. This time, I'm not denying that I'm feeling all kinds of things, and none of those things are romantic and girly and wistful…I don't know what they are, but I know they promise complication and confusion and things without clean definitions to lean back on. This time, I won't be able to play logic games to absolve myself of responsibility.

But, even knowing this, I keep kissing him. Slow, soft, yet hard, kisses, packed with all those complicated, confusing things. Kisses that tell me he doesn't really understand either.

So I run my tongue along the line of his lips, and let my conscious mind slip away as I surrender to the flow.

— Tristan —

I can’t believe I’m crying. I kiss Mia like she is my lifeline because I don’t want her to look at me crying. I don’t want to be crying. I guess taking the ’shrooms was a good move because I wouldn’t want all of this to come out in front of the Brotherhood. But I don’t want to think about it now either. I just want to kiss Mia until I become a creature of pure sensation, lost in physicality, unaware of the cerebral.

Mia runs her hands up my chest, up my neck, weaves her fingers into my hair, and pulls me down. I open my mouth and pull her bottom lip in, sucking it between my teeth. I could suck on it forever.

I slide my hands around her waist and down to her hips. I pull them into me. I want to feel her whole body pressed against mine. She is telling me things with her body, and I need to hear all of it. I am afraid to hear it, but right now fear isn’t in control, and I can’t stop listening.

She pushes herself up onto her toes and my body rocks as her weight shifts. Her elbows are on my shoulders, her perfectly firm tits are against my chest, her outer ankles brush my inner ankles. I open my mouth to devour her tongue, but it slips past my lips and traces the roof of my mouth. Warm, gooey electricity travels straight down to my core.

I slip my fingers under her giant sweatshirt. The skin of her hips is soft, it curves and dips and I follow it all the way up to the sides of her ribs. She isn’t wearing a bra, but I am lost in feeling her ribs right now. They are perfect ribs. My fingers fall into the dips between them and they fit like they’ve been custom sized. Julian’s ribs feel perfect too, but in such a different way; Mia’s are so tiny.

I coax her sweatshirt up. She raises her hands and only breaks our kiss at the very last second. I toss her sweatshirt to the ground and her hands land on my waist. Her thumbs gently press into the soft sensitive skin between my hips and abs. I groan as our lips recapture each other’s.

That tells me things. Things I didn’t let myself hear before. The tenderness, the honesty. She is telling me that she doesn’t have much experience with this, but she is a natural speaker of body language. She is sensitive to the nuances and phrases in my dialect because she is observant. When her hands trace down to the lines of my pants and her thumbs dip just below their threshold, they tell me that she isn’t just horny. They tell me that she cares.

I don’t know why she cares. And I can feel in the way her confused lips coax mine into deeper and deeper kisses that she doesn’t know why she cares either. All this caring scares me. But right now Fear is not in control.

I took ’shrooms to clean myself out. She is clean. Clean in a way I don’t know how to be. And right now, because she is so clean that caring comes naturally to her, she is making me clean with her kisses and touches and the way her body rocks close to mine.

I hear Julian’s footsteps come around, and then he is behind me. I feel his hot breath on my neck right before his teeth gently lock onto the spot where my neck and ear and hairline meet. He knows what that spot does to me, and in this state it is intensified. My legs shake and I lean back into him.

His hands travel down the sides of my body and slip into my jeans right next to hers, and then hers travel back up my abs, my ribs, my chest. She bites my lower lip oh so perfectly. Together they are telling me things that should have been obvious. How much alike they are. How good and pure and loving they are.

Julian is always willing to bend to be what I need him to be when I am falling apart and Mia, well, she’s here, which means she has those instincts too. Is that what love is? I wouldn’t know. It’s not a language that is native to my land.

I think I’ve always loved Julian as much as I could love, but I’ve known Julian for so long that he is safe to let in. No one else is safe. People don’t get lucky enough to have more than one person who can love them.

Yet, here is Mia, who I've been nothing but varying degrees of shitty to since we met, willing to save me from myself in the middle of the night, even if it costs her sleep and time and peace of mind.

I said that she came with me because she wanted to know what was on the other side, but maybe I was the one who wanted to know. I wanted to know if she would come. I wanted to know what it would mean if she did. I really was so fucked up by the time I knocked on her door that I wasn't thinking any of this stuff…But I did knock on her door. What does that tell me about me?

Shut up, my good familiar logic tells me. *This will just make things complicated. Just fuck them, go to sleep, and go back to normal tomorrow.*

But that part of me is far away and sounds weak, feeble, even pathetic, in my current state. That is Fear. That is my demon. These are not comfortable thoughts because these thoughts open the door to change, and change is never welcomed by Fear.

So I did…I did want to see what was on the other side—the side where I trust Mia Winters. I wanted to see what would happen and now I'm finding out.

I took 'shrooms to become clean, in hopes that the ayahuasca wouldn't swallow me alive—but it's not the 'shrooms cleaning me. They opened me up to the possibility of cleansing, and then I went to Mia, and Mia brought me here, and now I've got both of their arms around me and both of their bodies against mine and I feel clean.

My fingers slip from Mia's hips into her sweatpants and I grab onto her pert ass, pulling her with me as I fall into the familiar surface of Julian's chest. She lets me grab on just long enough for my dick to go from hard to completely solid. I groan into her lips as she slowly pulls them away.

Her fingers go from being sprawled across my chest to running down my arm, to sliding into my palm and hooking themselves through mine. She takes a step away, but our fingers are still joined and my feet instantly follow her. Julian, ever aware, has pulled his hands away from the

gentle teasing circles he’s been slowly climbing down my groin with, and wraps them around my other hand. Soon he’s fallen into step in front of me, beside her. Together they slowly lead me across the dim pulsating living room, into the hall where the paintings on the walls dance.

The bedroom door seems to float open, and I seem to float through it. As I do, I can hear the frame whisper that I do not need to be afraid of the change they will lead me into together. I know that I won’t believe it tomorrow, but right now I can feel it, so right now it is real.

- *— Julian —*

I hadn’t given up hope that Mia would stop being upset and Tristan would stop being such a moron, but I certainly didn’t think anything like this would happen again for months, let alone in just over three weeks. Tristan really is an idiot for what he did, and I haven’t forgotten the horrible fear that gripped me when they first arrived, when I thought that he really might have gone too far, but I can’t say I’m sorry this is happening.

Mia, her lithe figure half naked, her hair spilling over her shoulders, steps up onto my tall king-sized bed. She pushes herself back to the center and Tristan, my beautiful, stupid, wonderful, terrible lover crawls after her. His movements are liquid and heavy, they lack their usual grace and precision, but in their place are honesty and openness. I follow them up and don’t stop until both of them are beneath me.

My lips find Tristan’s first because they have things to tell him—how grateful I am that he is alive, how incredibly stupid he is, how unreasonably attached I am to continuing to have him as a core component of my reality. Then, once my lips are swollen and hot from trying to kiss the stupid away, once I’ve gripped his jaw between my hands and placed fresh hickeys just inside the line of his collar, I turn to Mia.

Her hands are sprawled above her head. She is tilted at just the right angle for one breast to lie perfectly flat across her chest cavity while the other rests on my blanket. Her soft, flat stomach rises and falls, begging my eyes to follow the movements all the way down to what her pants conceal. Her eyes are deep, thoughtful, receptive, and brimming with desire as she looks from the point where Tristan and I met lips only a second ago to my mouth, traveling toward hers.

I have wanted to kiss her since the last time I kissed her, and it has been so hard not to. I haven't felt attracted to a woman with this much intensity…ever. Tristan and I have been doing this since we were closer to boys than men, so we sort of shaped each other's sexuality; I don't know if it's possible for me to be attracted to another man with the same intensity I am attracted to Tristan. Women, though…I've been with women, but I've never felt this aggressive, insane pull in my gut that tells me to claim a woman.

Mia's fingers trace their way up my shirt and then glide around. I feel tugs on buttons. She presses her tongue against mine, slowly, sensually, no self-consciousness, and as I fall deeper and deeper into our kisses she unbuttons my shirt from the bottom up.

Her lips move with mine, our tongues entwine the same way our minds do when lost in conversation. I want to be lost anywhere with her. She tastes like mouthwash and honey sweet tea and Tristan. I swear I can taste Tristan's tongue inside of her mouth. I like the taste of them together.

I feel Tristan shift beneath me, rolling and curling until his head is between our stomachs. One of his hands snakes between my legs, rubbing my balls through my pants, while the other cups Mia's breast, pulling it to meet his lips. Her tongue presses soft gasps into mine; clearly, whatever he is doing turns her on.

She tugs at my shirt, trying to force it over my shoulders. I kiss her hard, then pull away from her. On my knees, I watch her stare up at me as I yank my shirt off, and I watch Tristan readjust himself so that he fully captures one of her nipples in his mouth and the other between his fingers.

He slides himself half onto her and she weaves her fingers through his hair, welcoming him.

As I watch them, my pants go from tight to suffocating, so I unbutton them and let them fall to the floor. I grab onto Tristan's hips and bend over him, pulling his ass into the curve of my groin. My lips land on the center of his spine and I trail kisses all the way back down to the lip of his pants.

A soft, sweet, guttural moan fills the room as Mia's back arches. Her legs come up around Tristan's waist. I release his hip to catch one of them, pushing her thigh back. I twist around and plant a soft little nip on it too. They both still have their pants on. I think that needs to change.

I release Mia's thigh and tug Tristan's pants and boxers over his hips in one fell swoop. He shimmies his legs to help me get them over his knees and ankles. I kiss my way back up his thighs and force them farther apart, so that I can hook my fingers under Mia's sweatpants.

She arches her hips upward so I can pull her pants over her ass, and once I've got them over her knees, I can't help but lean in and kiss the supple dip on the inside of her leg where her thigh and knee meet. I suckle it until her knees shiver in response. I gently suck her skin all the way down to her ankles, pull her legs free, and then all three of us are completely naked.

Tristan has moved from her breasts to her lips. Her arms are wrapped around his shoulders, his balls dangle, almost brushing her pubic hair, and I dive for the little space between. I lick Tristan's balls until the skin around them shivers and they pull tight. He moans into Mia's mouth and I wrap my hand around his hip to grab his cock from the front. He groans even louder and I fight the urge to bury myself in his ass. Instead, I bury my tongue between Mia's wet lips.

Her thighs tense and then relax in response. She opens her legs wide, forcing Tristan's even wider. His balls are on top of my head, his cock is still in my hand, and soon I've got both of them moaning and tense in all the right places. I love this. I love the sounds they make together.

My thumb makes it to the tip of Tristan's cock and I spread his pre-cum as far down the shaft as it will go. I can twist my head and lick the base of it, then twist back and swirl my tongue around the inside of Mia's clitoral hood. She makes a sound like a silent scream and it is so hard not to enter her.

I crave the feeling of her. It's been weeks and weeks, but I know that tonight, something is happening that is not about me. Tonight is about the two of them unlocking doors they don't know the names of—particularly Tristan. The fact that he went to her when he was so fucked up means something, and I want them to find out what that something is. I can see it, but I know that they'll have to discover it on their own, in their own way, in their own time. I have to be patient.

— Mia —

Julian kisses and sucks on one pair of my lips while Tristan practically devours the other. One of his hands is buried in my hair, the other squeezes my breast, my nipple trapped between two fingers. Our teeth hook on each other's, only to get swept apart by hungry tongues.

His lips are full of pain and longing and love that has so rarely found purchase. I kiss him back, feeling consumed by whatever wavelength he is on, like it's infected me and is carrying me down its mysterious river to a place unknown. I am a creature composed only of sensation and compassion; a creature that exists only in this moment, where time does not.

My hands run from his hair down his neck, around to his chest and back, over and over. I want to feel the tightness in his muscles, the tension in his tendons, the pulse of his heart inside of them all. I shimmy my legs out from between his and wrap them around his waist.

Julian pulls away for me to do this, and then plunges his tongue and fingers back inside of me with a vengeance. They go even deeper now. A

jolt of pleasure shoots right through me and I thrust into his fingers. He obliges me. His tongue moves from my entrance to my clitoris and two fingers become three. He circles them around and around and my walls pulse harder and harder with each rotation.

He builds me up until I have to break away from my kiss with Tristan because I am panting. Tristan places his mouth at the nape of my neck and sucks on me, hard but slow. I buck my hips up faster and faster. Julian's fingers feel amazing, but not as amazing as the real thing.

I trace my hand down Tristan's back and around his waist to his cock, where my hand meets Julian's. His fingers do not give way to mine, so I wrap them over his and gently push down. He slides his hand up Tristan's cock and pulls his mouth and fingers away from me. I arch my hips, desperate to be filled, but Julian does not give it to me.

With the tip of Tristan's cock, he rubs my clit, starting right where his tongue left off. Tristan moans into my neck as Julian builds both of us into orgasm. Just when I am on the verge of letting the pressure consume me and spill over, he stops, and brings the tip of Tristan's cock lower.

— Tristan —

Mia's slick entrance is literally right at the tip of my cock. My instinct to thrust is at war with the desire to be lost in every tiny sensation. She is so warm, and Julian's hand at the base of my dick is squeezing me just right. My balls are so tight, if Julian doesn't stop what he's doing soon I might just come. I don't want to though. Not yet. I want this to go on forever. I want to never feel anything but this.

With each swirl around Mia's pussy I grow closer and closer to being inside of her. I let myself groan freely and find her lips again. We lock tongues and suck gently on each other.

Julian jerks my cock forward and then lets go. A second later, his hands are on my ass cheeks and his tongue is between them and then whatever strength I had in my legs crumbles. I slowly collapse onto Mia, first my chest falls into hers, then we are rib to rib, stomach to stomach, and as I fall, I instinctively thrust, and I am finally inside of her.

Her warmth is overwhelming in this state. Something inside of me sparks that almost generates tears. I don't know what it is, but for the first time in a very long time I feel…I *feel* so much that can't possibly be described as lust. I don't even move inside of her. I can't. I have to adjust to whatever powerful, bizarre force is taking me over.

I kiss her harder. I plunge my tongue past hers. I want to feel as much of her as possible. I want to be inside of her as deeply as possible in every way. I think I want to melt into her, and in this state of mind, as her heart beats against mine, I feel like that is exactly what is happening.

Julian's tongue pokes deeper and deeper into my ass. Mia slowly rolls her pelvis, grinding up into me. She is soft and sensual and it feels like she's somehow pulling me deeper into a land I've only heard about but didn't believe was real. But I can't go deeper. I am so overwhelmed that I become nothing but a creature of sensation, and in it, I am free.

Julian's tongue leaves my tight ass and his thumb takes its place, rubbing without entering. I hear the gentle roll of his nightstand drawer opening and the click of a lube cap. Julian's thumb disappears, weight shifts on the bed, Mia squeezes her legs tighter around me, curves her pussy so somehow I actually am deeper inside of her, and then the slippery tip of Julian's cock lands on my tailbone and traces it down.

He dips inside of me quick, but only an inch or so.

"*Aaaaaahhhhhh,*" I cry. Mia bites my lower lip gently with her teeth, sucking me back into our kiss, her arms winding tighter around my neck, her fingers deeper in my hair. Julian slowly, slowly, pushes deeper into me.

By the time he is fully inside of me, Mia has found a consistent rhythm. As she rocks me from side to side, he slowly slips in and out, pushing me and pulling me in and out of her. I hate coming before my lovers, it's an issue of pride and worth, but right now…

Right now I don't think I have a choice, and…and for the first time ever, I am not worried about being judged. I am not worried about my worth decreasing to them. I am not self-conscious and self-controlled and half-removed. I am completely consumed in this.

I have had sex on 'shrooms before. Sex with Julian, who is the only person I've ever felt safe letting some of my guard down with, but even then, something was running in the back of my brain, something was holding on to the ties and binds of Fear that have shaped me. But right now, wrapped up between the two of them, with Mia's arms around me and Julian's hands holding my hips…inside of her while he's inside of me…I feel safe. I feel free.

He thrusts down as she thrusts up. Slow, but so intense, over and over. I feel my balls tighten and tighten more as pressure builds. I feel the great, hot rush of liquid electricity wash through me and blanket me. For a second, all of me is connected to the base of my cock and all of me releases as an invisible trigger is pulled and everything I am is poured into Mia.

In the timeless seconds that follow, I collapse completely, my face falling into her hair. I feel liquid run down the sides of my nose. Am I crying again? Self-disgust reflexively flares to life, but Mia's hands comb my hair behind my ears, soft and slow, and she pushes her cheek against mine, pulling my face into the nape of her neck. Julian leans down and kisses the sides of my stomach. Self-disgust falls silent and I am wrapped back in that wonderful, terrifying, foreign warmth.

Julian slowly pulls out of me, and Mia's legs go lax, but her arms stay wrapped around me, holding me to her. Julian's weight shifts to one knee, and Mia shifts under me, so that my utterly depleted, sweat-slicked body slides down hers. Half laying on her, half laying on the bed, I feel Julian's thighs touch mine, feel the front of his knees fall into the back of mine, feel his pelvis press into my ass, and his arm fall over my ribs.

Jerky motions and the sound of sliding cloth. He's pulling pillows around. I close my eyes as Julian and Mia go still again. Their legs remain entwined with mine, their arms wrapped around me.

I feel Julian's breath on the back of my neck and I am surrounded by the smell of Mia's hair. I can feel their hearts beating. I can hear them too. Their heartbeats become the cradle and the lullaby that rock me into a kind of sleep I don't think I've ever experienced: contented.

— Mia —

Julian and I stare at each other with one eye over the horizon of Tristan's peaceful, sleeping face. He looks so innocent like this. I see so much in him now that I never did before. I don't know how I will feel or what I will think in the light of day, but I know right now, I don't want to take myself away from him, even if parts of me ache for a release that hasn't yet come.

After many, many minutes of Tristan breathing the slow quiet breaths of REM sleep, Julian props himself up on one elbow. Carefully, I draw my arm out from under Tristan's neck and do the same. Julian's lips curve into a gentle smile, his eyes twinkle with a special kind of joy as they shift from Tristan's face to mine.

Very carefully, he lifts his other arm off Tristan's ribs, where it has laid for so long that their skin has to peel apart. He watches Tristan's face as he does this, careful not to wake him. Then he brings his freed hand up to brush the edges of my jaw. I shift forward just a little, just enough for him to brush his hand all the way against my neck, back behind my ear, into my hair. I adore that feeling.

Carefully, he shifts his weight and pushes his hips back, seemingly a centimeter at a time. Tristan's hand twitches a little, but his fingers are resting on my elbow, and, just like a baby, the contact seems to give him reassurance that nothing has changed. Julian pauses, and Tristan's fingers and breath return to the way they were before.

Julian manages to shimmy out enough to be fully leaning up on one arm now, not just an elbow. He bends over Tristan's sleeping form. My eyes drift to Julian's beautiful lips, as they grow closer and closer to mine. He places the most chaste kiss on my lips. It is long lasting and passionate, but so soft and sweet. The dull achy throbbing between my legs instantly flares back to life, and then he pulls away.

He gently rolls to the other side of the bed and slides off it. But he walks around and leans halfway onto the bed on my other side. "I'll be right back," he whispers into my ear.

He quietly closes the bathroom door. I hear a sink come on and realize he must be washing something. When I deduce what that something must be, the muscles between my legs clench and a fresh wave of anticipation whirls through me.

Regardless, I stay the way I am until he comes back out, propped up on one elbow, looking at Tristan. He really is angelic like this. As my eyes trace the contours of his face, it transforms in front of me into younger and younger versions. I think about what he said about his parents. I don't think of myself as very maternal, but I don't know how anyone could not unconditionally love their child.

The bathroom door opens and closes. I watch his face for any sign the noise has disturbed him, and then gently extract my legs from between his. As if he's psychic, Julian picks up the discarded blanket from the floor and we drape it over Tristan again.

Standing naked in the dark, we step toward each other. I see things that don't need names twinkling in his smiling eyes. His thumbs brush the edges of my hips, my fingers trail up his bare chest and into his hair, and our lips meet in the middle.

Kisses with Julian are full of unspoken things, just like kisses with Tristan, but the unspoken things I've got to say to Julian are filled with joy and light and giddy promises that I know neither of us can make. Kisses with Tristan are filled with confusion and frustrated curiosity and reasons we shouldn't be sharing kisses. Both of their kisses warp reality though. In

the kisses, those reasons seem to matter less and those unmakeable promises seem possible. I lose track of reality, and then I lose track of why I ever thought I needed to keep track of it.

He bends down and lifts up my thighs. I realize what he is trying to do and jump up, wrapping my legs around his waist. With my elbows on his shoulders and his hands gripping my ass, he carries me out of the bedroom and back into the dimly lit living room.

- *— Julian —*

I don’t put Mia down until we’re right next to the couch. Her knees brush mine as her feet land. Our toes touch. She doesn’t break our kiss and neither do I. I don’t think I can.

Her kisses are soft and honest. I feel so much sweetness toward her. Our wordless conversation is one of gentle passion. I have never kissed anyone quite like this. Tristan and I have plenty of passion, plenty of honesty, but not quite the same openness, the same vulnerability. Tristan always has some degree of guard up somewhere, but Mia doesn’t.

Her fingers run down my chest and settle on my hips, her thumbs brushing the sensitive skin where my pelvis meets my thighs. My dick is already erect, pressed against her navel. The animal in me wants to just dive into her, but the rest of me knows to savor this, because it might not happen again.

I gently cup her chin with my palm, my fingers flow along her neck, back to the soft nape where her messy ponytail has created tangles. My thumb dusts the edge of her cheek, all the way up to the dip of her eye. She leans into my touch and I press my tongue farther into her mouth, exploring every inch of her.

She responds with the slightest bit of pressure on my hips, pulling our bodies closer together. I finally break away from her lips, but swiftly capture the beautiful skin under her jaw. I suck just hard enough to leave tiny hickeys…Nothing that most people will notice, but something that I will see traces of for days.

I slide my hands down her arms, and then onto her thighs, and from there all the way back up over her hips, her waist, her ribs. I let my thumbs brush the outer edges of her breasts and she shudders. I swear I can smell her arousal.

I place light kisses across her collarbone, down between her breasts. I grip her hips to steady myself as I fall to my knees, and my kisses become harder the farther down her stomach I go. When I've kissed all the way down to the point where soft skin becomes an unruly tuft of hair, I *know* I can smell her arousal.

I lick the inside of her right thigh, then her left, long and slow all the way up, curving inward as I go, forcing her legs open wider as I climb. My hands still on her hips, I nudge her backward and she follows, lowering herself onto the couch. I catch her under her knees and spread her legs wide, so there is nothing between me and the source of that intoxicating smell.

As much as I want to devour her, I rein myself in and lick the outside of her labia, teasing her lips. I feel the muscles of her legs tense and relax. I hear tiny gasps catching in her throat when I hit the right spots. Whenever one of these treasure troves of neurons is discovered, I dance around it with the tip of my tongue, gradually increasing pressure until she shudders. Then I move on to another one.

As I grow closer to her center and my nose brushes her clit, she winds her fingers into my hair, lightly pushing and pulling. I love the way it feels. I love the way she is turned on and struggles to remain patient instead of rushing to satisfaction.

I lick all the way up from the bottom of her wet entrance to the hood of her clitoris. Her juices are sticky and sweet, the taste of pineapple. I run

my tongue back down and dip it inside of her. I really want to pull out but it is so hard.

I get just far enough away to suck the lips of her labia in. I tease one between my teeth and she arches her back and gives out a guttural cry that the pillow she quickly shoves over her face cannot completely muffle. Naturally, I've got to give equal attentions to the other side.

As I suck and nibble and suck and nibble, fresh warm juices gush out of her and trickle down onto my chin. My inner animal's cage has been opened. It's so hard not to pounce.

I release her supple lips and plunge my tongue into her. She gasps in surprise and I can feel her inner walls clench around my tongue. I just push it in deeper. She is delicious. So, so unbelievably delicious.

I prop one of her knees over my shoulder so I have a free hand to squeeze my own cock. If I don't do something to relieve some of the intense pressure inside of it, I might come just from eating her out, and I don't want to do that. I want to make her come half a dozen times before I let myself come inside her.

So, with a few good sucks, I drink up all of her juices and then pull out of her to give her sweet little nub the attention it deserves. I don't have to open my eyes to know the hood has retracted. I rim the edges of her nub all the way around and then settle my tongue just outside of it in the ten o'clock position.

My tongue flat, I lick up and down, back and forth, until I'm forming an elliptic that tilts along the tangent of her clit. The underside of my tongue becomes a cushion where I direct most of the pressure, and judging by the tightening of her fingers in my hair, it's exactly the right amount of pressure.

Her breaths become shorter and shorter pants. They are like drumbeats that I get lost dancing to. I circle my tongue over and over, faster and faster to meet their tempo. I feel consumed by an addictive delirium.

Her legs go rigid, stretching all the way out, so strongly and suddenly that they knock me off balance. Quickly righting myself, I plunge my tongue inside of her once, only once, and then go right back to the edge of her clit, picking up where I left off.

“Yes, yes, yes, please,” she whispers, her hands squeezing my skull. “Please, please, please.”

I keep going and going. My tongue feels like it could fall off from exhaustion, but the strain on that muscle actually seems to be channeling a little bit of the insane blood pressure pumping through my cock. The hardest part about continuing to draw those wonderful, quick pants out of her is keeping the rhythm instead of diving back between her juice-slicked folds.

I take the hand that has been gripping her thigh and I slide it to her entrance. I slip inside a little and then press down, stretching her rim. “Ohhhh God,” she moans, letting go of my hair to grab the pillow again.

This eggs me on. I redouble focus on the circles near her clit. “Please, please, please,” she mutters into the pillow.

She moans and groans. Her hips arch and buck, forcing my fingers deep inside of her. I feel her walls squeeze around them, and her legs come together so I have to fight to stay in contact. Her whole body writhes and twists, and finally I let her go over the edge.

I stand up and watch her body go from rigid to limp, watch her breaths slowly grow longer, watch her hands gradually release the pillow over her face, until it falls away and her half-open eyes meet mine. I cannot help but grin in satisfaction as I look at her, beautiful and flushed from what I’ve just done. She curves her bottom lip under her top teeth and her lips stretch into an exhausted smile.

I drop back to my knees and pull her hips so that her wet, throbbing pussy is pressed against my abs. I lean over her and kiss her unabashedly, as if she were and always has been mine to kiss. She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me in, welcoming my tongue with hers, sucking on my

bottom lip as I suck on her top lip. This warmth and openness is really something. It makes me feel like I am utterly free with her, free to explore her body and mine and all the things they can do together.

Her hands trail downward and wind under my arms, then worm into the tiny spaces between her inner thighs and my stomach. She reaches between us and grasps my cock. Now it is my turn to gasp into her kisses, as just the touch of her fingers sends electric tingles into my balls.

She gently traces down to the base and then wraps her fingers around it. I pull away from her just a little to allow more room. She snakes her other hand in there. It cups my balls, pulling them closer. I groan into her lips and our kiss breaks, but our heads slide, side by side, so that we are craned into each other's shoulders.

She gently jostles my balls up and down, exactly the way Tristan showed her. I am becoming putty, I just want to melt into her and let myself lose all consciousness beyond the desire to thrust into any orifice she offers. And the orifice I want the most is only inches away.

I let her stroke and tease until I feel like I'm going to explode from the frustration of being so relentlessly stimulated, but not stimulated enough to release the tension that has been pumping through me for at least half an hour. She releases her grip on my base and trails her fingers up to the rim of my head. She traces around it slow and delicate. That is my breaking point.

I reach between us and pull my hips back. I grab my dick, knocking her hands away. I glance quickly at her, looking for any indication that she isn't ready, although it feels like torture to even take that extra second. Her eyes dance with warmth and excitement and hunger. She bites on her bottom lip again, that mischievous, knowing smile blossoms, and that is all I need.

I practically fall into her. She is slick and warm and I bury myself in her wetness all the way down to my balls, grabbing her hips to pull her as close as possible. She arches her back and her eyes slide shut and she moans again, a moan of mixed pleasure and pain. I fight back the animal

that wants to recklessly fuck her and hold still, letting her adjust to having me inside of her.

Her body slowly relaxes and her legs spread farther apart, welcoming me even deeper. Her hands wind up between her own knees, forcing them back, and I sink into her, allowing myself slow, tentative, circling thrusts. My eyes are locked on her face for any indication that she needs me to go slower, to take more time…but her ass rocks back and forth, thrusting up, and I don't need to know anything beyond that.

Circling my hips, I pull out and then let myself fall back in, out and in, out and in. Each time the friction makes her soft cavern hotter, makes my balls squeeze a little tighter as the trigger to pour into her is drawn just a little closer to release. To fight it back, I focus on her face, on every micro-indication that a particular spot gives her more pleasure.

It takes a bit of twisting from side to side, but then I hear a change in her breathing. Gasps that are just a bit sharper than the ones before. Thrusts that make her eyes flutter open for a second and her hips arch even higher. Like the studious soul I am, I memorize them and then repeat over and over, hoping to achieve mastery.

Her upward thrusts become stronger and more frequent. I let her control the pace, not only because I know that she is more likely to come at a rhythm she sets, but because it is easier for me not to, and although I'm pretty sure that I don't actually have the self-restraint to make it to half a dozen orgasms tonight, I at least want to get halfway there.

I look down at her nub and adjust my angle just a little, so I am leaning over her more than I am perfectly perpendicular to her, hoping my pubic hair will tickle it enough to help engorge her other pleasure spots. I wish Tristan were awake to lick her nub into orgasm while I focus on her G-spot. Just the thought of that, of seeing his head between us, of seeing her hands in his hair the way they were in mine as I rock my cock in and out of her, just that fleeting image is enough that I actually have to break our rhythm so I don't explode on the spot.

Her eyes flutter open and meet mine, the obvious question in them. I plunge back inside of her and lean down all the way, locking our lips together. She flings her arms around my neck and kisses me hard. I wrap my arms around her back and decide to pull her into a sitting position, so she is practically sliding down my dick.

I swirl my hips around and around. “Fuck,” she gasps into my mouth, breaking our kiss. Her head falls to my shoulder and her teeth land at the base of my neck and wrap themselves around my muscle, sucking more than biting. I groan into her hair and thrust up harder.

She moans again, so I repeat the same twisting thrust, squeezing her closer to me. My thighs burn, but her nails on my back and her constant muttered pleas keep me going.

Her nails and teeth dig into me harder. So hard that it hurts. So hard that I feel the animal slink out of its cage and prepare to pounce. I slide my arms farther down, holding her pelvis tighter to mine as I thrust up harder, faster.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” she pants and I thrust and pull, downright pounding into her. There is more freedom in this than what I am used to with Tristan. The truth is, you do have to be more careful with anal sex—the anus is not made to take this sort of thrusting. Sex like this invites complete abandon.

Her mouth leaves my neck, her nails leave my back, and her arms wrap so tightly around my shoulders that she is practically supporting all of her own weight. Her body goes rigid except for her shuddering pussy, which thrashes in every direction against my cock. She spasms with orgasm and I slip my arms open and catch her by the ass, giving a few more final, hard thrusts just to make sure she’s finished.

She goes limp on me, and I know I’ve succeeded. I am so close to coming, but I have a goal. I’m going to make her come at least one more time, and in order to do that, I need to give both of us a break.

I lift her off my cock and slide her down onto the couch again. We're both so sweat slicked that she does literally slide down. She collapses backward and looks up at me with dazed eyes and the most beautiful honest delirious grin I have ever seen.

Some primal male pride swells to life within me. I caused that grin. I've certainly made women come before, which is why I know that it really is an achievement—making a woman come is not nearly as easy as making a man come. Of course I know I've made Mia come before, but I know her better now and tonight feels different somehow.

I collapse back onto my knees and kiss her thighs, her belly button, all the way up to her breasts. I take one in my mouth and the other in my hand. I swirl her nipple around my tongue then gently suck it in. She groans and arches her hips.

I let go of her nipple temporarily, just long enough to pull her to the edge of the couch and slip my dick back into her. It's been less than a minute, but I bury myself in her like I've been dying of thirst and she's an oasis. Her groan is almost primal this time and she instantly wraps her legs around my back.

I pull out and then thrust again. She thrusts to meet me. Clearly, she is ready for more.

She rolls her hips around and around, grinding into me, hungry. I watch her abandon, and whatever self-control I have left gives way to my own abandon.

Bracing myself by grasping under her thighs and pulling her toward me, I thrust in and out, meeting her grinds. With each slip out and every plunge back in, it feels like she grows wetter and tighter, like she sucks me in farther. The pressure in my cock quickly returns to nearly bursting.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah…" Her breaths become disjointed, cut-off pants and her hand lashes around for the pillow, which she immediately shoves over her face when she finds it. Her pelvis grinds into mine. My hands slide from

her thighs to her ass and I grab her cheeks, angling her so that what little space was left between us is eradicated.

“Pleeeaaassseee,” she groans with the frantic yet slow, tortured moan of someone who is at the verge of falling over the edge of pleasure; so close that it is painful. I know the feeling. I’m having it too.

My knees burn from friction against the rug, all the muscles in my body are exhausted, but I pump hard and harder, pull her closer and closer. I focus on the feeling of my balls smacking her ass and the sight of her pert breasts bouncing faster and faster.

I feel her thigh muscles tense in a new way. She lets go of the pillow and her arms stretch out; she grabs the edges of the couch. Her back arches. The pillow falls away from her face and I see her eyebrows crease and curve, her mouth clenched in a silent feral growl, and then I feel a hurricane of warmth erupt inside of her, and it didn’t come from me.

Her pussy clenches hard, even harder than it did last time. Her calves are so tightly locked around my ass that I couldn’t take myself out of her if I wanted to, and I don’t. I plummet into her as hard as I can, finally willing to let the animal take control.

He goes from thrusting to rutting harder and harder, hard enough that to my surprise she is huffing and panting and twisting her face up within thirty seconds and her barely relaxed legs go tense again. She grabs the pillow and squeezes it over her face and actually growls into it.

Then I find myself growling too, and with one last desperate push into her, my balls tighten, and the pressure finally goes over the edge. I erupt into her and feel her muscles suck up my seed. Our sweat-drenched hair entangles as I breathe into the curve between her neck and shoulder and she leans her jaw against the top of my chin. I collapse on top of her, breathing hard.

I don’t know how long we lay like that, listening to the sound of our own hearts beating and each other’s breaths slowly growing longer and deeper. At some point, I slide out of her and I feel a pang of loss and regret

as I leave her warmth, but it allows me to settle my head on her stomach, which is soft and comfortable and close enough to her vag that every breath is flavored by the smell of our juices as they leak out of her onto my couch.

Her fingers fall into a rhythm combing through my hair just as they had Tristan's earlier. I feel lulled into the tug of sleep. Although it is nearly dawn and I am absolutely exhausted, I know I will regret letting us fall asleep half on, half off the couch.

All the muscles in my body are ready to turn to goo, but I summon the last bit of strength in them and not only manage to stand up, but to also slide my arms around her back and hoist her up. She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my hips.

I carry her back into my bedroom, just as I'd carried her out of it. I gently set her on the bed, far enough away from Tristan not to wake him. She lays back, her hair sprawled out across the rumpled sheets, her eyes picking up the moonlight and glittering as they wordlessly speak to mine. I don't know what they're saying, but I know I never want them to stop saying it.

I crawl on the other side of Tristan and pass her a pillow. She settles onto it as I do the same. We look at each other in silence until her pretty eyes slide shut; mine are quick to follow.

I drift off thinking about how nice it will be to wake up and see both of them naked in my bed. These thoughts turn into dreams about making eggs hollandaise, but for some reason in the dreams I add raspberry jam to the hollandaise sauce. In the dream, I don't realize I've messed the sauce up until I'm about to serve it, but it doesn't matter because when I come out of the kitchen they're having sex on the table. Even in the dream, I know that's how I'd like to start every morning.

- *— Mia —*

I listen to Julian's breath fall into rhythm with Tristan's as I pretend to sleep. When I'm sure that he's asleep, I gently sit up on the bed. For a few minutes I just sit there, staring at them in the waning moonlight. They are both beautiful, both warm and cold, soft and sharp.

I want to reach out and touch them in little ways—brush a lock of hair off the side of Tristan's face, pull the blanket up a little higher over Julian, so he doesn't get cold. I resist those instincts though. I need to leave without either of them waking up.

I slip off of the bed and feel around in the dark until I find my pants. I creep out of the room and softly shut the door behind me. It creaks slightly and I freeze, my teeth clenched, but long seconds come and go and no noise or motion is made. I shut it completely.

I retrieve my shirt and sweatshirt from the living room, then sit on the couch and pull Julian's socks and boots on, only to pull them back off when I remember I don't have my phone and will have to look for his if I am to get home. I find it on the kitchen counter just as the first hints of dawn poke through the windows.

I sign into my Uber account—I could walk, but twenty minutes in the slush with just a sweatshirt and boots does not sound appealing. There is a driver who can be to me in ten minutes. That's both a very long and very short time.

I look around for paper and a pen. Luckily, Julian really is a dork and those implements are not hard to find.

Dear Julian, I write.

My lips immediately twist together in embarrassment. *Dear Julian?* I internally chastise myself, *Are you eighty?* I tear that piece of paper off and start again.

Julian,

I don’t know what to say. I’m happy I stayed, but I also just don’t know what to say. I promise that I’ll tell you when I do. I’m sorry. Please tell Tristan (unless he reads this first, in which case, Tristan¡¦) I’ve got to tell my roommate something, but all I will tell her is that he was sick, his roommates were out, and he needed someone to help him to Health.

I really am glad I stayed.

Sincerely,

Me

I read it over and cringe. I consider rewriting it again, but decide that there is no point. It’s definitely honest and straightforward, and that’s the best I can do at the moment. I leave it on the counter, where I found Julian’s phone, which I place on top of it.

Quietly, I pull his door open and make my way out of his fancy building. It’s only a few minutes before the green Toyota Camry I’m waiting for appears. The driver must be a morning person because he is chatty, asking me about what I’ve got planned for the day.

I decide to practice the story I’m going to give Leanne on him. In the back of my mind, I wonder when Leanne went from being the friend I told everything to, to being the friend I hid everything from. I really have too much to think about to add that to my list right now, though.

—

Leanne is asleep when I get back, but she wakes up when I get into bed. *Fuck you,* I mentally curse my squeaky mattress as she pops up like a

meerkat.

“What happened?” she whispers before a great yawn takes over her face.

“He’s sick, his roommates were out, he needed someone to take him to Health,” I answer, just as I’d practiced. I shimmy down under my covers and add, “I’m so tired,” hoping that she’ll just drop it.

“He needed *someone*, or he needed *you*?” she shrewdly scrutinizes.

Damn.

“He needed someone, I think I’m just—I mean the three of us are the only philosophy majors on this floor and we have class together in the morning so maybe he figured I could tell the TA why he didn’t show.” I fake a yawn of my own and snuggle deeper under my covers. *Please, Leanne,* I silently beg, *just let it go.*

“Uh-huh,” she mutters, fixing me with that look that all good lawyers, and future lawyers, have. “So what’s really going on with you guys? He obviously likes you and even if you don’t like him, you must have done or said something to make him think that you should be the person he comes to when he needs help.”

“Leanne,” I sigh, flopping onto my back, the feeling of my pillow more torture than comfort because all I want to do is close my eyes, but now I can’t. “There really isn’t anything going on between us other than that, yes, maybe he has some weird crush on me. I can believe that he has the emotional maturity of an eight-year-old and being a jerk is his way of showing affection. Really though, I don’t know that he does, and I don’t care if he does. I honestly don’t want his attention and I really, really, really don’t care if he has a crush on me. I took him to Health because it was obvious he was sick and I’m a reasonably moral person.”

“And you stayed with him there for”—she glances at the glaringly bright digital clock—“four hours because…?”

“I let them pump me with an IV bag to boost my immune system because I don’t want to catch whatever he has. I fell asleep on the cot they put me on for a bit and the nurse didn’t wake me. We were in separate rooms. I don’t even know what happened to him. I left without finding out, because I don’t have any particular interest in him.”

Her eyes narrow, fixed on mine, like she could dig up the truth with just a few more seconds of x-raying me. I don’t give her the chance. I roll over and close my eyes, “I have to sleep, Leanne. I have class in three hours and I’m going to be stuck at the *Daily* until at least midnight.”

She doesn’t say anything. I hear her sheets rustle. Her silence is weird. She must be able to sense that I am lying. Fuck. Tomorrow is not going to be fun.

I feel guilty for lying to her. I feel guilty for apparently being good at it. I feel guilty that, despite all of those feelings, within a few seconds sleep temporarily washes them away.

—

Wednesday

Time Until Tap Night:

2 Days

— Mia —

I get up in time to go to Julian’s class. For the first time ever, I arrive before him. The minutes tick by and he doesn’t show up. He did say he might cancel class, but he didn’t send out an email or anything, which is what usually happens when a TA knows they’re going to cancel.

Five minutes after class was supposed to begin, Aaron Ploense announces that university policy says that if a professor or TA is more than fifteen minutes late, it means class is canceled and we can leave. Ten minutes in people start to get really excited. The fifteen-minute mark comes and everyone else gets up to leave, happy to have a free hour.

I sit frozen as a bizarre fear I never would have expected grips me. *Did something go wrong? Was Tristan not okay?* My mind spirals into dozens of possibilities, ranging from Tristan dying in his sleep to waking up puking blue, to him going psychotic as a result of all the psychoactive chemicals he put into his system and doing something like stabbing himself, or Julian, or both.

I pull my phone out and text Julian. *Hey, you're not in class. Is everything okay?* Then I send a second text, *Medically, I mean?*

I get up and let my legs automatically travel the path to coffee. I resist the urge to check my phone until I am in line. It takes me at least five minutes to walk to Atticus; five minutes is forever in texting time. I pull my phone out of my pocket, confident that there is a response waiting telling me everything is fine. There isn't.

I stare at my phone…and stare, and stare…No response.

I order coffee. I find an empty table. I pull my laptop out of my bag. No response.

I check my email. I check my phone again. Nothing. I check the *Daily* site to see if anyone has commented on my editorial from yesterday. I read all six comments. I check my phone. Nothing.

I am actually considering going back to Julian's apartment when that wonderful little buzz finally hits my pocket.

Things are fine. Got your note. I'll text you when I can.

What does that mean? I think, a strange queasiness suddenly arising inside of me. He didn't add a smiley face or anything. This is the kind of

text you send when something is wrong or you're trying to get someone to leave you alone—or both.

Fuck, I internally groan. What was I thinking last night? I really should have just gone home after I delivered Tristan to Julian's apartment. Now I've opened up all kinds of doors to all kinds of feelings, and I don't know what to do about it. Whatever state of mind I fell into last night could have handled all of these feelings. But now I'm not in that state of mind.

I'm so stupid. Tristan tugged at my heartstrings, Julian tugged at something in my gut that just wants to smile when I see him, and both of them tugged at my pants. I let it all happen because I am obviously a glutton for emotions that distract me from the things I should be paying attention to.

In a brash move of rebellion against my own feelings—and a quiet internal wisdom that suggests I take the time to listen to and even examine them—I turn my phone off, pull my earbuds out, and play online Tetris until it is time for my next class.

—

At dinner that night, I do not see Leanne, who has said hardly two words to me all day, but I do see Tristan. He is with a couple of guys on the tennis team. I am looking at him when he happens to look at me, but he quickly looks away. Later that night, we pass each other in the hall and he acts like he doesn't see me.

I haven't turned my phone back on, although I almost have dozens of times. I am glad I haven't when this encounter happens, when our shoulders nearly brush and he pretends I am invisible. I am glad I haven't talked to Julian, because Julian and Tristan come as a pair, and Tristan's refusal to acknowledge me tells me everything I should never have forgotten.

I am not mad at Tristan, I'm not hurt, I don't feel used or tricked or lied to. In fact, my perspective on his behavior really has transformed and I still feel empathy for him, just like I did last night, but now I also feel heavy and frazzled and I don't need those feelings in my life.

I head to the *Daily*'s Writers' Room, and stay awake until two a.m. writing an editorial about the perils of our generations' trend toward participating in undefined, uncommitted sexual relationships. I scrap the entire thing without re-reading it, because after it's all poured out, I don't want to actually think about it.

—

Thursday

Time Until Tap Night:

1 Day

— Mia —

Leanne and I do not talk until Thursday night. I wake up at three a.m. and I have to ask her to go work in the living room because I need the light out so I can sleep. She jumps when I say her name and her eyes look a touch crazed when they meet mine. "Sorry," she hurriedly says, "yeah."

As she picks up her laptop to move it I see what she is looking at—Facebook.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" I ask, trying to sound as far from confrontational or combative as possible. I would really like us to return to being friends without me having to tell her the truth—whatever that elusive thing is.

“I’m just checking some stuff,” she replies, her eyes still on the screen.

“Like what?” I yawn. “Did someone get married or have a baby or die?”

“So you can have secrets and I can’t?” she shoots back, not exactly in a nasty way, but definitely not in a friendly way. It’s still enough to feel like a cut.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” I sigh. “I’m just trying to be friends. I’m sorry you don’t believe me about Tristan, but really, ask him, he’ll tell you the same thing.”

Actually, I’m not sure about that although the first chance I get I’ll email him all the main information points. Regardless of the fact he’s ignoring me right now, he’s invested enough in keeping his relationship with Julian a secret that I am confident he will go along with it.

“Fine,” Leanne sighs. “I don’t really want to be mad or anything, I just feel like we haven’t really talked or hung out in a long time and it makes me feel like there’s a bunch of stuff I don’t know but maybe there isn’t. Sometimes I think you must be having a secret relationship because you’re so much busier all the time than you used to be.”

As she deflates and opens up, I feel like such a terrible person. At some point, I became a really good liar and I started doing it a lot, and now, despite feeling gross about it, I’m going to lie again. Why am I keeping Tristan’s secret when it’s hurting my relationship with someone who I call my best friend?

“I just want to be editor in chief next year, and with Ashley quitting the paper out of the blue last month, successfully picking up all of that slack will help demonstrate that I am editor in chief material. It’s kind of the perfect opportunity.” The only part of that that was technically a lie was the *just.* The rationalization that omission is not technically lying is at work again.

“I get that,” she says, her eyes flicking back to Facebook. She scrolls to the top and refreshes.

“So what has you all crazy-eyed?” I ask, trying to pack as much humble humor into my voice as possible.

“Tomorrow is Tap Night,” she says in the confessional whisper of an embarrassed sinner, “and I heard a rumor that the secret societies tip you off the night before by having three of their members all like random pictures.”

I nod, and that’s all it takes for the dam around her basin of nervousness and desperation to pour out. “Well, Corrine Miles and Jesse Buckley both liked the picture of me from when we went horseback riding for Azzi’s birthday, and that was like, last May, so why would they both do that tonight, you know? And they’re both in Wolf’s Head, which is not like my ultimate hope, but, still.”

“That is a really weird coincidence,” I concede—and not just because it’s what she wants to hear, it really is.

“Exactly!” she gushes. “So, yeah. I know I should just sleep, but I can’t stop refreshing. I feel neurotic.”

“You look neurotic.” I laugh and throw a pillow at her. She protectively cranes over her laptop and it snaps shut. She stares at me in shock for a second and then bursts into huge wonderful laughter—laughter I haven’t heard in weeks. It’s enough to send me into my own silly fit of glee, and I throw a second pillow at her.

She catches it and then tosses it back at me with her softball arm. I duck and it slams into the wall. “Shit,” she giggles, because our suitemates are sleeping on the other side of that wall. Then I erupt into giggles too.

—

Tap Night

- *— Mia —*

I wait with Leanne all evening for a knock at the door. Jenna and Whitney, our suitemates, are seniors and neither is in a secret society, so they have nothing but scorn hidden by feigned indifference for Tap Night. They're out at a bar, so Leanne and I have the place to ourselves, and we set up camp in the common room.

Leanne is a nervous wreck. When she checked Facebook this morning there was no third "like." I reminded her it's just a rumor that secret societies do that, and there's no reason to believe it's true.

"It's too much of a coincidence that they both liked it though," she moans. "It's like a mean joke or something since everyone knows that rumor."

"They're friends," I try to soothingly reason. "Corrine probably liked the picture and then if, Jesse is following her, that would cause it to pop up in his feed, so he liked it too."

"That doesn't even make sense." She sighs dramatically.

"Yes, it does," I insist, poking her with my foot. She swats at it, so I just shove my toes closer to her face, until at least I am laughing hard enough that it forces her to crack a smile.

"Look," I say once I catch my breath, "everyone knows that the societies are really based more on who your friends and family are than on academic merit or the belief that you're going to grow up to be crazy successful…And since Alec is supposedly in Key and he's been hanging out with you so much, chances are—"

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Three long, hard knocks resound through our suddenly quiet apartment. They are way too loud to be coming from any door but ours.

Leanne jumps out of her seat, then freezes. I stare at the door, then at her. She's gone pale and seems to have temporarily lost her ability to close her jaw. Then in the blink of an eye she reanimates—running her fingers through her hair, slapping her cheeks, spinning around and grabbing her phone then putting it back down, glancing in the mirror, biting her upper lip, frantically, wordlessly pleading with me to support her, then whipping her eyes back to the door, and freezing again.

I weave my arm through hers and walk to the door with her, trying not to laugh. It's not that I find her ambition or even how seriously she's taking this funny. It's just that it's funny to see my friend, usually so cool and professional and focused, acting like a little kid who is overcome by the joy and fear of potentially winning a trip to Disneyland.

So I lead her to the door and open it for her, then hide behind it and watch as her eyes go completely wide in shock. She goes from shocked to elated. The smile spreading across her face is exactly that Disneyland smile, her eyes flutter down—looking for the objects that will be presented to her to show her which society has chosen to invite her, and then…

Then her spreading smile pauses. Her eyebrows sink and curve and her eyes grow dark.

She takes a step back. Her eyes meet mine. There is so much confusion, so many mixed emotions in them, and her smile is completely gone.

"What?" I whisper, instantly worried.

I step out from behind the door and she pushes it all the way open. There is indeed a masked, cloaked figure standing on the other side. His—judging by the height—hands are hidden in the robes, undoubtedly holding the objects of revelation.

"Mia Winters," he whispers, solemn and quiet.

Oh no.

I step fully in front of the door. Leanne is staring at the space between the masked man and me, frozen. I lean out and whisper imploringly, “You’re not here for me, you’re here for Leanne.”

He shakes his head without words. Across the hall, I catch a glimpse of another cloaked figure and hope one is about to arrive for her. But the other figure stops across the hall and three doors down. He knocks.

In the time it takes Tristan to open his door, the masked figure in front of me has pulled out his hidden object. A large, heavy iron key.

Across the hall, another masked figure presents the same object to Tristan. Tristan’s eyes are fixated and the minute it is held out to him, he takes it.

“Do you accept?” the figure in front of me asks.

I think about everything I’ve recently learned about Skeleton Key—hallucinogenic ceremonies and favors people will call in for the rest of your life. I think about Julian’s sureness that nothing good would have come of him joining the Keys, and that nothing good will come of Tristan joining them. I think of the fact that I’ve never even particularly wanted to join a secret society. The answer is obviously *no*...

I look from the masked man to Leanne behind me. She looks shocked, even speechless, and then the twinges start to creep into her expression. Betrayal, self-hatred, jealousy…and those are only going to compound into anger. Anger that will be directed at me whether or not I take the damn key.

“Do you accept?” he asks again.

“I…” It’s happening again. The sensation of being pulled back from my body, forced to watch it do and say things while I am stuck helplessly observing.

Tristan’s masked figure leads him down the hall. They are coming toward us, only steps away. My eyes meet his, and his shift down to catch a glimpse of what is being held out to me, then shift back to mine. There is shock in his eyes, as I’m sure there is in mine, and something like respect, and something else…Relief? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t matter.

“I will only ask one more time,” the masked figure says to me. “Do you accept?”

And then, because I am a complete idiot making a serious decision I never thought I’d be faced with making…because I am making it without actually considering anything that matters…because what I’m basing this decision on is not conscious and certainly not something that I can or want to consciously acknowledge… instead of saying no, I hold my palm out.

The key is placed in it. I can hear the empty space where Leanne has stopped breathing. Then the echo of the door shutting behind me after I step through it. Then, all I can hear is my heartbeat reverberating between my ears like drums as I march off into a world I never intended to discover.

End

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To Be Continued

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